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Towards a Dramaturgy of Appropriation: the Re-Vision of Shakespeare in Two Canadian Plays. Michael O'Brien's *Mad Boy Chronicle* and Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet.*

by

James Stuart McKinnon ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of Drama

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *Towards a Dramaturgy of Appropriation: the Re-Vision of Shakespeare in Two Canadian Plays*, submitted by James Stuart McKinnon in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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Abstract

This thesis is an investigation of the dramaturgy of Shakespeare appropriation in two Canadian plays; namely, Michael O'Brien's *Mad Boy Chronicle* (1995) and Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* (1998). Arguing that the appropriation and adaptation of Shakespeare by contemporary playwrights is an important and imperfectly understood form of cultural and theatrical production, it examines the potential for conscripting Shakespeare's cultural authority in order to challenge that very authority. Each play is located in relation to its Shakespearean parent text and in light of contemporary critical schools of thought such as cultural materialism, feminism, and post-colonial studies.

While recognizing that every performance of or reference to Shakespeare is in some way an appropriation, this thesis focuses on appropriation as dramaturgy, that is, the ways in which playwrights make use of Shakespeare, and the strategies they use to contest his considerable cultural authority and claim a space of their own. Furthermore, it is the first extensive critical study of either of these important recent Canadian plays.

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Introduction

> A literary event can continue to have an effect only if those who come after it still or once again respond to it – if there are readers who again appropriate the past work or authors who want to imitate, outdo, or refute it.
>
> H.R. Jauss, quoted in Marsden 1991: 1

Shakespeare vs. Playwrights?

Hermann Jauss's argument offers both hope and frustration to the contemporary playwright. Theatre, after all, provides the most concrete example of how literary events can only continue to have an effect through the response of later readers and writers: a play must provoke subsequent appropriations by audiences, actors, and directors, or it will never be performed again, and such plays are, for all intents and purposes, lost. Jauss seems to valorize those who appropriate, re-write, revise, and so on, since he suggests that a past work is only made important by present responses. But how does Jauss's statement apply when a "literary event" in question has provoked so many responses, and has thereby generated so much authority, that each new response must work harder and harder to make a ripple in an ocean of influence? What if the author of the literary event to which one wishes to respond is often said to be the greatest writer ever?

Playwrights are not alone in confronting the influence of Shakespeare. Educators, critics, theatre artists, and media pundits have been disputing the role of Shakespeare in every part of society for the last three decades. Once the gold standard of theatre repertories around the world, synonymous with literary and aesthetic value, Shakespeare has come under sharp scrutiny by those who implicate his plays and his reputation in various schemes and schemata of oppression and hegemony. Critics from various post-modern schools of thought have successfully shown how Shakespeare has been made to serve imperial, patriarchal, and elite interests; some post-colonial nations, especially in Africa, have removed Shakespeare from their educational curricula.

In the theatres, too, Shakespeare is in question; even major national theatre centres that built their reputations on Shakespeare's, such as Canada's Stratford Festival and Britain's Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), have been gradually moving away from a focus on Shakespeare's work since the mid-1980s. In an analysis of recent trends at the Stratford Festival, Brian Taylor notes that, although the overall number of performances has increased, Shakespeare has suffered a relative decline at Stratford, having fallen from 100 percent of all Stratford performances in the 1958 season to 33 percent in 1998 (Taylor 1999a: 346). Furthermore, Taylor notes that in recent seasons, the Shakespeare plays produced at Stratford have had the worst box office numbers and the most negative critical reception, even while its non-Shakespearean productions – performed, designed, and directed by the same artists – succeed both commercially and critically: "Wildly praised in the 1990s for its productions of plays like *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, and *Waiting for Godot*, Ontario's Stratford Festival has been stridently attacked for 'pedestrian' or 'outrageously overproduced' Shakespeare" (Taylor 1999b: 200). Taylor also shows that Shakespeare's declining market share at Stratford is reflected by similar statistics at the RSC and the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, the latter of which now produces only three Shakespeare plays a year (Taylor 1999a: 350).

Signs of waning influence notwithstanding, Shakespeare continues to do very well for a four hundred year-old writer, despite the existence of numerous federal and local government initiatives to support Canadian work in the theatre and all other media. Certainly, no Canadian playwright has an entire festival dedicated to his or her work. Shakespeare continues to thrive at Stratford, in most major English-language regional theatres, and increasingly in outdoor summer festivals across the country. And Shakespeare's continued pre-eminence in the theatre is only one aspect of his overwhelming influence in contemporary culture: Shakespeare, or the social construction of Shakespeare as a symbol of learning, class, creative genius, and literature and literary values, is a powerful influence in commerce, education, language, and all manner of cultural politics. As such, Shakespeare presents an enigma to living playwrights around the world: on the one hand, anyone drawn to the profession of playwriting is likely to have a certain amount of admiration, or at least respect, for Shakespeare; on the other, given Shakespeare's disproportionate share of Canada's limited theatre resources, his influence is a barrier to getting one's plays produced at all. Furthermore, many contemporary writers are allied with the critics mentioned above in resisting the various hegemonies in which Shakespeare is now frequently implicated. For the writer who is motivated to tell stories about indigenous or marginalized cultures, for example, or to create female characters who transcend traditional templates associated with Shakespeare's heroines, Shakespeare's influence may represent both a material and an ideological bugbear.

One strategy employed by contemporary writers facing the influence of Shakespeare is to attempt to usurp his authority for their own use, or as Jauss puts it, to appropriate an old text in order to "imitate, outdo, or refute" it. The appropriation of Shakespeare, the "putting-to-use" of his plays, began even before his death, when the supporters of the Essex Rebellion commissioned a performance of *Richard II* to foment revolution on the eve of their abortive coup in February, 1601[1]. Ever since, those who have performed or revised Shakespeare's texts have enlisted them – and through them the cultural authority that they have accrued over the centuries – in the struggles of the world outside the theatre. In this thesis, I will discuss the dramaturgy of appropriation to pose the following questions: How might contemporary playwrights make use of Shakespeare's omnifarious influence in an attempt to challenge or interrogate that very influence? What potential does the dramaturgy of Shakespeare appropriation offer to writers who seek to confront and dispute widespread assumptions about Shakespeare? Can such plays effectively enact a challenge to the dominance of the master text, or are they bound to be subsumed, contained, and ultimately filed under Shakespeare? My subjects are the plays of Michael O'Brien and Djanet Sears, English Canadian playwrights who engage their audiences in a confrontation with Shakespeare and the complex of ideas and values he has come to represent.

In the body of the thesis, I argue that both O'Brien's *Mad Boy Chronicle* (1995) and Sears's *Harlem Duet* (1998) exploit their links to the Shakespearean canon in order to interrogate Shakespeare's place in contemporary theatres, schools, and culture, and to this effect I identify and evaluate specific dramaturgical tactics of appropriation. The remainder of this chapter comprises an introduction to the plays and the playwrights, and an introduction of the methodological and theoretical problems I will address in the body of the argument. Chapter one surveys the existing scholarship on the appropriation and adaptation of Shakespeare and situates it in contemporary Shakespeare studies in an attempt to identify and discuss certain problems in this field. In chapter two I discuss *Mad Boy Chronicle* as an example of appropriation in theory and in practice: first, I examine the intertextual relationships between *Mad Boy Chronicle* and its Shakespearian and non-Shakespearian influences, and then I identify O'Brien's dramaturgical strategies of appropriation as an example of what Mikhail Bakhtin and Michael Bristol call the "carnivalization" of literature. In chapter three I look at *Harlem Duet*, again both as part of an intertextual dialogue between Shakespearean and non-Shakespearean texts and in terms of the dramaturgical strategy of appropriation, in this case not a carnivalesque parody but a post-colonial re-vision.

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[1] See Montrose, 1996: 66-75 for an account of this episode and of its use in recent historicist criticism.

The Plays and the Playwrights

Mad Boy Chronicle premiered at Alberta Theatre Projects' *playRites '95* Festival in Calgary, after workshops at the Banff Playwrights' Colony (1992 and 1994), the Canadian Stage Company (1993), and Theatre Passe Muraille (1994) (O'Brien 1995: 10). Since then it has been produced in Vancouver (1996), Montreal (1997), Kingston (1997), and Los Angeles (2000). Described by its author as a "Viking Hamlet Saga," *Mad Boy Chronicle* began as an attempt to "debase the greatest play of all time" by (literally) cutting and pasting together "the infamous 'Bad Quarto' of Shakespeare's 'Hamlet'" and the medieval source of the Hamlet story, Saxo Gramaticus's *Gesta Danorum* (O'Brien: 8-9). In his foreword, O'Brien says that he started adding lines, scenes, and characters of his own, until finally the story started "speaking in its own tongue" (O'Brien: 8), but it still contains unmistakable familiarities to both *Hamlet* and the more obscure *Gesta Danorum*. Set in "Helsingor, Denmark," in the mid-winter of 999 A.D., the play begins as the story of Horvendal, a young boy ostracized from his warlike community by his belief in Christ, and by the fact that, as the surviving son of the late chieftain of the village, he is despised and bullied by the current chieftain, who is, of course, his uncle. The conflict between Horvendal, who feigns madness to protect himself, and his uncle Fengo, who suspects the ruse, fuels the first half of the play, but in the second half, the play seems to depart from both its main sources when a group of Christian priests appears and announces the conversion of Helsingor and all of Denmark – by the sword, if necessary. In chapter two, I argue that O'Brien's strategies of appropriation are essentially similar to those of carnival, and that they draw parallels between the colonization of the medieval world by the Church and the appropriation of the ancient Danish saga by a Christian Renaissance author: Shakespeare.

If *Mad Boy Chronicle* moves *Hamlet* back in time, *Harlem Duet* moves *Othello* forward. The winner of the 1998 Governor-General's Literary Award for Drama, the play was workshopped in New York at the Joseph Papp Public Theatre, and its first production, by Toronto's Nightwood Theatre won four Dora Mavor Moore awards in 1997 (Sears 1997: 7). After a successful run at the Tarragon Theatre in April 1997, it was remounted at Canadian Stage in December of that year (Fischlin and Fortier 2000: 285a). This was an important first for both Sears (whose *Afrika Solo* (1990), is already distinguished as the 'first published stage play by a Canadian woman of African descent (Fischlin and Fortier: 285a)) and for Canadian Stage, which had never before produced a work by an African-Canadian (Knowles 1998: 30). Though set in 1990s Harlem, the play is cleverly set up as a prequel to *Othello*. It tells the story of Billie, the Black woman that Othello – no longer a Venetian general, but a professor of English at Colombia University – has recently abandoned in order to move in with his White colleague and lover, Mona[2]. Billie, who has always insisted that colour is "only skin deep" (*Harlem Duet*: 44), finds herself slipping into depression and succumbing to hatred before her dismayed friends and family. The play explores various ways in which the intervention of White culture affects the growth and development of gender relations and cultural practices in the heart of African-American society. In addition to recontextualizing *Othello* in space and time (the lead actors also play other versions of themselves in two "mirror-plots" set in the 1860s and 1920s), *Harlem Duet* de-centres and inverts the raced and gendered specular economy of its textual antecedent. In chapter three I argue that, where *Othello* asked a White, male spectatorship to consider the possible consequences of introducing an alien Black man into White patriarchal society, *Harlem Duet* constructs a Black, and perhaps female, spectatorship and asks it to contemplate how Black communities are affected by the unequal or inequitable assimilation of men and women into White society.

Methodology

I locate both of these plays in the critique of dominant and elite cultural practices that began this chapter. *Mad Boy Chronicle*, which claims to return *Hamlet* to its original context in pre-Christian Scandinavia, takes issue with the practice of dominant cultures of absorbing, effacing, or erasing marginal cultures by denigrating or appropriating their cultural practices. This process is exemplified in *Hamlet* itself, Shakespeare's dramatic appropriation of a Danish saga that is now heralded as one of the cornerstones of English literature. *Harlem Duet* recontextualizes *Othello* in order to construct and address a raced and gendered spectatorship that Shakespeare could not have anticipated. Since both plays are allied with the feminist, post-colonial, post-structural, and materialist schools of cultural critique mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it follows that my analysis is informed by these theories and their main proponents, especially in the fields of theatre and Shakespeare studies, including such critics as Jonathan Dollimore, Alan Sinfield, Gary Taylor, Barbara Hodgdon, and Susan Bennett. Since I see in *Mad Boy Chronicle* certain strategies of the carnivalesque – very similar to those employed by Shakespeare himself – I will refer to the work of Michael Bristol, one of the first scholars to examine Bakhtin's work on carnival in the context of Elizabethan theatre. Since *Harlem Duet* deals with sexual and cultural difference in contemporary and historical African-American culture, and the influence of Shakespeare and *Othello* in shaping that culture, chapter three situates Sears's work in the context of other appropriations of *Othello* by feminist and African-American dramatists and critics.

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[2] Throughout I will follow Sears's convention of capitalizing Black and White where they refer to people. Sears gives no rationale for this choice, but I find it useful to distinguish the use of the words as conventional, not natural, since what they signify is not actually colour, nor can it simply be called 'race,' 'culture,' 'ethnicity,' etc. As Billie says in the play, 'Who called us Black, anyway? It's not a country, it's not a racial category, it's not even the colour of my skin' (56).

First, however, I will address current work on cultural and literary appropriation, especially with regard to Shakespeare. My primary interest, dramaturgical strategies and tactics of Shakespeare appropriation, is in many ways the most problematic, because the phenomenon of appropriation – especially Shakespeare appropriation – is so widespread, and the term so widely and indiscriminately used. Recent surveys of Shakespearean appropriation and adaptation, such as that of Fischlin and Fortier (2000), have found that past scholars have used their own definitions, connotations, and substitutions, such as "adaptation" or "re-vision," to the extent that such words threaten to become as meaningless (or meaning-full) as "post-modern" or "ideology." Therefore I devote a substantial part of the opening chapter to locating and clarifying my own use of the term in the considerable corpus of studies of Shakespearean appropriation (or re-vision, or adaptation, etc.), to make an appropriation of my own.

O'Brien and Sears's plays appropriate Shakespeare and the social construction of Shakespeare as a symbol of cultural value in different ways, to different ends, but both resonate with the critical re-evaluation of Shakespeare that is underway in the world beyond the stage. Each appropriates Shakespeare in order to shed light on how he is appropriated elsewhere and how his image, his reputation, and his words are deployed in contemporary culture. *Mad Boy Chronicle* challenges the idea of the stable, fixed, and authoritative literary text, and also the assumption that Shakespeare is the "owner" of "his" plays; by returning to the source text for *Hamlet* – as well as the infamous Bad Quarto – *Mad Boy Chronicle* not only appropriates Shakespeare but also exposes the various colonial apparati behind Shakespeare's appropriation of Hamlet's story. Djanet Sears confronts commonplace assumptions about sexual and racial difference in *Harlem Duet* which, like *Mad Boy Chronicle*, appropriates both Shakespeare's text (in this case *Othello*) and the four centuries of discursive baggage that accompanies it. Ultimately, both of these plays ask their spectators to confront "the assumptions under which Shakespeare is produced," and also those under which it is received (Bennett 1996: 156).

Chapter 1 Theory and Methodology

In this chapter I situate the topic of Shakespeare appropriation in the context of a wider debate in the fields of cultural, literary, and theatre studies, and locate *Mad Boy Chronicle* and *Harlem Duet* in the historical practice of Shakespeare appropriation. In addition, I survey recent studies of Shakespeare appropriation in order to identify some current issues in the field and clarify my use of terminology (eg. "appropriation" vs. "adaptation"). The theory of appropriation, both Shakespearean and otherwise, is (as always) very much under construction, but establishing the perspective of this study with regard to current research is helpful in building a framework to approach *Mad Boy Chronicle* and *Harlem Duet*.

Since the 1980s there has been a marked trend in the fields of literary criticism and cultural studies – including theatre studies – away from the aesthetic analysis of literary texts as cultural artefacts endowed with a certain transcendent, irreducible artistic value, and toward the analysis of how cultural production and practices, literary or otherwise, exert their influence on the societies in which they circulate. The present work is guided by such a perspective: throughout this thesis I argue for an understanding of theatre and literature that foregrounds their influence upon and implication within the societies that produce them. Speaking on how emphasis in the evaluation of the literary and other cultural practices has shifted from "What (does it mean)?" to "How?" Stephen Mullaney observes:

> [T]he aesthetic analysis of literary texts, regarded as relatively self-contained linguistic artefacts, is being displaced by ideological analysis of discursive cultural practices, including but not restricted to the literary, and non-discursive practises as well; the interpretation of literature within a strictly *literary* history is being opened up to a less teleological but decidedly more heteroglossaic interpretation of the social, political, and historical conditions of possibility for literary production, and of the recursive effects of literary production and dissemination upon these conditions. The literary is thus conceived neither as a separate and separable aesthetic realm nor as a mere product of culture – a reflection of ideas and ideologies produced elsewhere – but as one realm among many for the negotiation and production of social meaning, of historical subjects and of the systems of power that at once enable and constrain those subjects. (Mullaney 1996: 19)

The struggle to redefine "the literary" is inextricably bound up with the appropriation of Shakespeare. Since the Shakespeare corpus has long been located at (or *as*) the centre of the literary, any renegotiation of the limits of the literary will be contested largely on a Shakespearean battlefield, for whoever gains the upper hand in the struggle to define the value of literature must occupy that territory. To put it another way, the struggle over "the literary" in cultural studies and criticism will inevitably be fought over Shakespeare's dead (?) body. Already, we see that Shakespeare appropriation is not only a theatrical phenomenon.

In both the theatre and the academy, there is an argument for moving beyond Shakespeare: why not let those who are preoccupied with the conservative aesthetic and intellectual ideals embodied in traditional critical and theatrical re-productions of Shakespeare continue to attend Stratford productions and write essays asking what we can learn about the nature of evil from the character of Macbeth, while those who are concerned with the role of art and literature in political struggles can write or write about new plays? Ivo Kamps addresses this question in "Alas poor Shakespeare – I knew him well!" It would be "strategically stupid," Kamps argues, to "let the conservatives 'have' Shakespeare," because Shakespeare's influence, or the influence of appropriations of Shakespeare, extends well beyond the limited reach of academic periodicals and theatres (Kamps 1999: 20). "Shakespeare has accrued so much cultural capital over the years that all sides have equal need of him – professionally, politically, and financially" (20).

Shakespeare serves both sides equally well by reaching the largest possible audience, and Kamps's observations are as true of the theatre as they are of the academy: "[a] competent Marxist or feminist reading of [Shakespeare's] work instantly situates the critic at the heart of academic debate, at a place where not only Shakespeareans but literary scholars of all fields converge" (20). Michael O'Brien and Djanet Sears, too, use Shakespeare to reach a broader audience and to situate their plays in the heart of the same debate, and like Kamps they are concerned not only with the way Shakespeare and the stage might be effectively conscripted in struggles over race, gender, class, imperialism, and so on, but also with the way Shakespeare has been enlisted in such struggles in the past. In this thesis I discuss O'Brien and Sears as writing in opposition to the essentialist construction that some critics call the "Shakespeare Myth," a complex of well-known (and well-worn) creeds, summed-up most economically by Terence Hawkes: that Shakespeare was a unique genius who wrote mainly to depict the foibles of a universal "human nature" that transcends cultural and historical differences; that his plays, "hold the mirror up to nature," reflecting what has always been true about all humans everywhere; that therefore, they are accessible and meaningful to all people, spanning imaginary gaps of culture, gender, language, class, and history; that, "in short, Shakespeare's plays present us with nothing less than the truth, the whole truth, and nothing less than the truth about the most fundamental matters of human existence"; and that to contest any of this is to concede serious defects of intellect, perversity, or at least exclude oneself from that universal humanity so truthfully rendered by Shakespeare (Hawkes 1996: 9-10).

It is not the object of this study to debate these ideas through an analysis of Shakespeare's works, or to document their dissemination through the ways the plays are staged and taught, for such studies are readily available. And it is certainly not my intention to suggest that the Shakespeare invoked in Hawkes' catalogue is the *only* Shakespeare circulating in the theatres and classrooms of the 21st century. Instead, my objective is to show how *Mad Boy Chronicle* and *Harlem Duet* challenge such assumptions on stage through dramaturgical strategies of appropriation. Each of these plays stages a challenge to the received wisdom about the value of Shakespeare, engaging their audiences in a critique along lines of gender, racial and cultural difference. What is appropriated, or challenged, then, is not the real Shakespeare, but an ideal, socially constructed "Shakespeare." By valorizing appropriations of Shakespeare I do not mean to suggest that "straight-up" productions of Shakespeare are inherently and unavoidably bad, or that, if appropriations are part of a radical critique of the politics of literature, that all Shakespeare productions must then be irrevocably connected to the reproduction of dominant class ideology. O'Brien and Sears seek to hold up the mirror not to Shakespeare but to the Shakespeare fashioned and valued by their culture.

"Appropriate" for Discussion

Jauss's use of appropriation emphasizes its connotation of the seizure of one author's work by another, or perhaps of one text by another. But a writer (or a text, or an utterance) may appropriate not only a line or a play of Shakespeare's, nor even just the literary and performative history of that text, but the social construction of "Shakespeare" as a symbol of all that is great about Western culture. In challenging *Hamlet*, for example, one challenges a massive complex of ideas about *Hamlet* and Shakespeare in the mind of the reader/spectator, including many whose origins are not in "Shakespeare" at all but in the Shakespeare tradition. When improv comedy actors ridicule "Shakespearean" acting, they are often really mimicking the "tea-cup" declamatory style of such 18th century actors as David Garrick, and discussions of Hamlet's "flaw," similarly, often have as much to do with the Hamlet constructed by influential critics like A.C. Bradley, Ernest Jones, or T.S. Eliot as with Shakespeare.

Ultimately, the relationship between the appropriation and the appropriated is dialogic: although appropriators are irrevocably indebted to Shakespeare by the use of his name, parts of his *dramatis personae* and plots, and innumerable allusions, so do they attempt to make Shakespeare answer to them. *Mad Boy Chronicle* and *Harlem Duet* are linked by the desire to aggressively question Shakespeare's place in contemporary

(Canadian) culture, and to engage their audiences in this same debate. So, although it is inevitable that a play that takes Shakespeare or Shakespeare's plays as its subject will be defined in terms of this relationship – in reviews, in press releases, on book jackets, and of course in graduate theses – it is also possible for such a play to exploit this relationship in staging a challenge to Shakespeare's cultural and dramatic authority.

History of Shakespeare Appropriation

Although the plays I discuss here are relatively new, appropriation is not a new phenomenon, and situating the practice of Shakespeare appropriation historically is useful in building a theory of appropriation with which to approach *Mad Boy Chronicle* and *Harlem Duet*. I have already cited the Essex faction's production of *Richard II* as an example of how Shakespeare was appropriated even in his lifetime. And as soon as the theatres were re-opened in the 1660s, Shakespeare's plays were modified to accommodate the new female actors and to celebrate – and later, to castigate – the restoration of the monarchy[3]. Many of the extensively rewritten versions of Shakespeare's plays were enormously successful, particularly those of Colley Cibber and Nahum Tate. Tate's version of *King Lear* pre-empted Shakespeare's version for 150 years, despite drastic changes that seem absurd to modern readers, such as the excision of the Fool, the Edgar/Cordelia romantic sub-plot, and the happy ending in which Lear is restored to the throne[4].

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[3] See Marsden (1991b) on how adaptations expanding the female roles contributed to the medical and moral ideological construction of the woman as passive, weak, and victimized.

[4] The longevity of Tate's *Lear* is all the more remarkable in light of Nancy Maguire's argument that it was written specifically to comment on the Exclusion Crisis, which had been resolved for 155 years before Kean's own 'restoration' of the Shakespearean text (Maguire 1991).

Since Shakespeare was then first and foremost an icon of the theatre, and not yet a bastion of England, English, and English Literature (the latter category having not yet been fully conceived as such), the 17th century appropriations were primarily enacted within the theatre; the plays could be made to play to either Tory or Whig sentiments as the occasion demanded[5]. By the mid-18th century, however, Shakespeare's words were commonly invoked in other cultural forms and forums, and his texts became the objects of intense scrutiny by such commentators as Johnson, Dryden, and Pope. The intensity of critical and editorial attention "effectively enshrined Shakespeare's text" (Marsden 1991: 4), curtailing the production of rewrites, but the apparent stability, permanence, and authority of the text has by no means fixed their meaning or forestalled ideological appropriation, on stage or otherwise. In the last 50 years, major productions of *Henry V* for both stage and screen have hailed King Henry as a patriot and reviled him for the same, depicting him by turns as a conscientious man of the people and a callous master of *Realpolitik*[6]. Nor has the fixity of the words themselves done much to limit the appropriation of Shakespeare and "his" plays as symbols of learning and acculturation, of England and English, of class and tradition, and so on. The connotations of seizure, theft, and abduction implicit in appropriation are apt, because they emphasize the fact that no such unauthorized use of a text goes uncontested; in recent decades, the use of Shakespeare in the colonies of the British Empire – including Canada – in the project of erasing and assimilating other cultures has been answered by a flurry of post-colonial counter-appropriation of Shakespeare. The same texts that signified the best that

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[5] See Dobson (1991) for an account of how the frequent shifting of sympathies from Caesar to Brutus in adaptations of *Julius Caesar* actually contributed to the elevation of Shakespeare 'to a status 'above' politics.'

[6] See Breight (1991) on the ideological maneuvers of Laurence Olivier, Adrian Noble, and Kenneth Branagh in (re)constructing Henry.

European civilization had to offer to their colonial subjects are now appropriated by Retamar, Césaire, and others in efforts to resist colonization[7].

Terminology: Appropriation vs. Adaptation

Nearly every critic to discuss the question of tampering with Shakespeare's plays in the last 25 years has taken note of one or both of the following problems. First, that adaptation and appropriation, both dramatic and otherwise, are as poorly understood and inadequately theorized as they are omnipresent; indeed, there is not even agreement about whether it is a specific dramatic or literary genre or a broad cultural practice. Second, because of this lack of theoretical understanding, there is no consensus about the use of the various terms used to describe and discuss this activity. For example, in each of four major studies and anthologies on Shakespeare adaptation and appropriation – Ruby Cohn's *Modern Shakespeare Off-shoots* (1976), Jean Marsden's *The Appropriation of Shakespeare* (1991), Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer's *Shakespeare and Appropriation* (1999), and Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier's *Adaptations of Shakespeare* (2000), the authors or editors are compelled to include a catalogue of the various synonyms for adaptation and a debate over the relative merits and drawbacks of each, until either an existing one is considered worthy or a new word is coined or, in the case of Cohn, adapted. And as one might expect, each subsequent study must deal with – and appropriate – previous arguments. Fischlin and Fortier, for example, re-trace Cohn's path to the word "off-shoot" and its sub-categories "reduction/emendation," "adaptation," and "transformation," only to discard it as "loaded with limiting value-laden connotations" and "ultimately untenable" (Fischlin and Fortier: 3a; see also Cohn: 3-4).

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[7] See Loomba, Ania and Martin Orkin (eds.) (1998). *Post-Colonial Shakespeares* London: Routledge.

The problem at the centre of this etymological morass is one central to Shakespeare studies as well as literary studies generally: a metaphysical bias which privileges "originality" over adaptation as if comparing legal tender to counterfeit. For example, as Fischlin and Fortier point out, Cohn hardly valorizes "off-shoots" when she compares them to the "Shakespearean stem" (Fischlin & Fortier: 3a, Cohn: 4). Whatever term is used, "adaptation" is historically regarded as something between the sincerest form of flattery and a debased corruption of the sacred Word on a continuum of derivative mimicry, in opposition to the continuum of original creativity that has traditionally been occupied by Shakespeare. The irony of this bias, and of the resulting under-theorization of adaptation, as has been pointed out by pro-adaptation critics such as Fischlin and Fortier, is that the traditional institution of literary studies which so privileges originality is centred on Shakespeare, while Shakespeare's plays are all adaptations (Fischlin & Fortier 2000: 4a). One of the most important reasons to study adaptations is to help formulate a solid refutation of this bias, to demonstrate, as Fischlin and Fortier assert, that "outside the distortion caused by the high regard in which our culture has held Shakespeare's plays … there is no necessary relation of value between original and adaptation" (3a).

Nevertheless, there is the problem of terminology to resolve. With regard to the problem of what appropriation/adaptation is, I follow Fischlin and Fortier in considering it a broadly-defined cultural practice as opposed to a genre of drama or literature. To refer to it as a genre causes interminable confusion because some works adapt a play (or plays) from one genre into another genre, perhaps using the conventions of a third. This is demonstrated by another Canadian Shakespeare appropriation, Anne-Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona, Good Morning Juliet*, which, as Fischlin and Fortier point out, appropriates the plots of two tragedies and uses the conventions of comedy, but ultimately "moves beyond comedy to embrace romance ... with its interest in redemption and reconciliation" (8a). In addition, adaptations can cross *media*, as in the case of novelizations and filmed versions of Shakespeare. And most importantly, there is the bias towards "originals" to contend with. The problem, as Shakespeare scholars know better than anyone, is that there *are* no originals. *Mad Boy Chronicle* is (arguably) an adaptation of *Hamlet*, but *Hamlet* itself is a stage adaptation of a French novelization of a Latin translation of a fragment of an ancient Norse saga that "originated" in an oral culture and thus has neither an author nor an original. Even if we were to confine ourselves to dramatic history, and then even if Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was the first staged version of the story, which it was not, the written texts we have today are merely conjectural editions based on a collection of earlier texts, the main one of which (the First Folio of 1623) was printed seven years after Shakespeare's death and is itself a *written* adaptation of an ephemeral, performed "original" that may have never existed as a complete written text before it was first uttered on stage by the Lord Chamberlain's Men. In this, Shakespeare's work exemplifies the concepts of intertextuality (as enunciated by Barthes, Derrida, Kristeva, et. al.) and dialogism (Bakhtin), which suggest that writing, as well as other non-literary forms of cultural production, are never original but always iterations and re-iterations of extant material and that writing and cultural discourse therefore, is always part invention and part adaptation, if not always in equal measures.

What is "original" to a given writer is not the text, but the iterative choices, the selection, combination, and arrangement of textual materials. And if this is true of all cultural production, then theatrical adaptation is not a genre as such but "a specific form of the cultural reworking taken to be basic to cultural production in general" (Fischlin and Fortier: 4b).

This broad conception of adaptation then, includes any activity that is undertaken to fit extant textual material into a new context. Every production of a dramatic text is an adaptation, and indeed every performance of a particular production is an adaptation of that production's score or *mise en scène*. Literary criticism, too, is an adaptive work, because it involves recontextualization in one way or another; and reception too, whether by a reader or a spectator, demands that the receptive subject(s) appropriate the text to fit it into a personal conceptual framework, or horizon of expectations. But while this definition of adaptation / revision / appropriation is helpful for understanding what adaptation is, if not mere copying, counterfeiting, mimicry, or plagiarism, it is clearly too broad to suffice in the discussion of the specific dramatic and theatrical practices at work in *Mad Boy Chronicle* and *Harlem Duet*.

Some critics, such as Cohn, formulate complicated schema of categories to distinguish between different kinds of adaptation: those that involve only minor cuts, those that include significant additions to the plot or *dramatis personae*, and so forth. Such a formulation is unsatisfactory here, because it entails the privilege of the written text over the performance text, another deeply inscribed bias, so to speak, of literary-based theatre studies. For example, Cohn's theoretical structure of categories, which distinguishes between types of "offshoots" based roughly on the degree of physical cutting and/or additions to the text, can only account for changes to a written text. The implication is that the more lines, sub-plots, and characters are cut or added, the farther the offshoot sprouts from the divine stump of Shakespeare's orginary genius. But the possibilities of this arborial scheme are truncated by the ready evidence of *performance* adaptations that change the play a great deal without changing the received text at all. One need not look far to find evidence of different performances of the same text – often claiming to be staged as Shakespeare intended and not adaptations at all – which render nonetheless quite different meanings without altering a word. *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Henry V*, and *Julius Caesar* can and have all been made to speak for feminism, militarism, and monarchism, and the opposite of each, respectively, without major cuts or additions[8]. Even at the level of reception, as Jauss suggests, every reading of the play, either printed or performed, is only made possible by the reader's appropriation of the text into his own frame of reference, her own horizon of expectations.

For the remainder of this discussion, then, I privilege the term appropriation, because of its connotation of a problematic and contentious relationship between the appropriation and the appropriated. When I speak of appropriations of Shakespeare I do not mean to posit a stable original text with a timeless, transcendent meaning. On the contrary, I have chosen the term appropriation to foreground the fact that every reading or performance of a text is an appropriation, part of an infinite intertextual dialogic struggle: appropriation is the act at the heart of all meaning-making. Conversely, I reject adaptation because the term is most often used to establish a new text or performance text as one that makes a few superficial changes to a stable, transcendent master-text in order to better enunciate the immanent meaning within that master-text to a particular spectatorship. We might argue, for example, that at the heart of *Macbeth* there lies a universal and universally valuable message about honour, a message we can best illuminate for a South African audience by setting the play in the pre-colonial Zulu empire. This play exists, in fact: it is *uMabatha*, by Welcome Msomi, and it has been performed around the world, including a recent staging at the restored Globe[9]. But the assumptions of a stable or universal meaning in *Macbeth*, or of a stable, universal construction of the pre-colonial Zulu empire, are clearly problematic. Even a seemingly radical adaptation, such as a feminist *Lear* or a post-colonial *Tempest*, may trade on the notion of a stable, transcendent meaning at the heart of the text (or simply replace it). Adaptation implies a connection to an essential Shakespeare; appropriation is explicitly *not* Shakespeare and challenges the idea of an essential Shakespeare. To adapt Shakespeare is to construct an imaginary stable author and a stable text, and claim to represent them; to appropriate is to deny these ideas and take responsibility for what is represented on stage or in the text; or in the case of the reader/spectator, to take responsibility for one's own interpretation instead of passively absorbing a meaning that is thought to reside in the text.

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[8] See Hodgdon (1998), Breight (1991), and Dobson (1991), respectively for more on the appropriation of these plays.

Appropriation of Shakespeare

Having established what appropriation means in this argument, I would like to put it in the context of alternative approaches to Shakespeare. Briefly, if we wish to confront the problematic construction of Shakespeare invoked by Hawkes, we can deal with Shakespeare in the following ways: by abandoning him altogether, by appropriation, or by investigating ways to read and stage the texts against the grain of this construction. Kamps has already established that leaving Shakespeare to the conservatives is strategically unsound; though I may tread close to hyperbole here, I suggest that one might as well attempt to redefine Judaism without the Torah as pose questions about the role of the literary without dealing with Shakespeare. The re-examination of Shakespeare by Marxist, materialist, and feminist critics seems a more viable option: since recent criticism has illuminated new tactics for reading and staging Shakespeare's plays in ways that expose or resist the racist, sexist, or imperialistic implications of conventional interpretations, might it not make more sense to re-stage Shakespeare than re-write it?

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[9] *Umabatha* is anthologized in the recent *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, Daniel Fischlin and Marc Fortier (eds.) (2000). London: Routledge: 168-87.

This strategy has been pursued to great effect and influence in the work of Mabou Mines, Peter Brook, and Michael Bogdanov, but it is not without its risks and drawbacks. Susan Bennett raises some pertinent questions about the search for "new ways to play old texts" in *Performing Nostalgia*, her important survey of recent approaches to the contemporary production of plays by Shakespeare and other Jacobean playwrights. Since spectators' horizons of expectations are largely informed by the way they encounter him elsewhere, and since they are most likely to encounter him as the mythical, omniscient Bard sketched out by Terence Hawkes, productions of Shakespeare that actively confound such horizons of expectations are often dismissed as either Shakespeare badly done or not Shakespeare at all.

The tendency to reject such productions, Bennett notes, is especially true of theatre critics, who have a particularly "knowing" horizon of expectations and whose reviews directly influence and prejudice the conditions of reception for later viewers. Observing that critics often condemn stagings of Shakespeare that stray too far from what is perceived to be appropriate to Shakespeare, Bennett remarks that when a production challenges received wisdom about Shakespeare, "a viewing contract seems to predetermine particular and conservative values for 'Shakespeare' that render the dissident production 'not-Shakespeare' and, by extension, not 'good' Art" (Bennett 1996: 89)[10].

Pericles at the University of Alberta: A Brief Case Study

Even in the contemporary theatre, in which the Shakespeare spectator's horizon of expectations has broadened to the extent that audiences accept a wide variety of *staging* potentialities for Shakespeare, the persistence of the idea of Shakespeare as a "universal-genius-whose-characters-speak-not-for-an-age-but-for-all-time"in the popular imagination is such that however Shakespeare is staged, critics and audiences often find a way to reconcile the production with this conception. Although it is notoriously difficult to quantify an audience's horizon of expectations, or evaluate their response as a whole, I would like to illustrate the tenacity of the contemporary Canadian spectator's closely held ideas about Shakespeare through a case study which, if not strictly statistically significant, offers interesting anecdotal evidence. In April 2000, I conducted a voluntary survey on the audience attending three performances of the University of Alberta's production of *Pericles*, directed by Montréal director Jean-Stéphane Roy. The production, while not an appropriation as I use the term, made substantial alterations to the text, including liberal cuts, changing characters and their genders, adding pantomimed "dumbshows" and altering the chronology of the plot.

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[10] Nor are critics the only group guilty of a narrow conception of what constitutes 'real' Shakespeare: in 1999 I was working on a production of *Romeo and Juliet* at Concordia University and faced similar narrow-mindedness from a member of the production team. The production was directed by Russian director Sasha Marine and incorporated some novel spectacular effects while playing somewhat against the grain of recent Montréal productions of the play (particularly the frequently remounted version by Montréal's Repercussion, a touring Shakespeare-in-the-Park company) by eschewing sentimentality. The production was well received, but one of the production staff objected to Marine's use of anachronism in the visual conception of the *mise-en-scène*, and remarked that the director clearly didn't know what Shakespeare was all about. Although, sadly, I did not write them down, her precise remarks indicated that she felt personally affronted by the impingement of Marine's *mise-scène* – which was by no means 'radical,' it must be said – on her conception of what *Romeo and Juliet* should be. This estimation was also based in part on the latter's broken English, revealing not only a rigid conception of what Shakespeare means and who may be permitted to interpret him, but also a type of chauvinism reminiscent of Victorian English reviews of Shakespeare performed in the colonies or by those not perceived as English (see Chatterjee and Singh (1999) on the surveillance of 19th century productions of *Othello* in Calcutta.). The Anglo-Canadian dismissal of a Russian's appropriation of Shakespeare is ironic, considering that the tradition of Shakespeare on the Russian stage began more than three decades before Canadian confederation. A further irony: Russia's Shakespeare tradition was inaugurated by another person deemed by Anglo-American critics as unfit to interpret Shakespeare: Charles Ira Aldridge, the first black actor to play Othello. Aldridge, having been essentially driven out of Anglo-American theatres by critics who preferred their Othellos of the 'tawny' variety, eventually found fame in Russia, where he was lionized and became an early mentor to Stanislavsky, who in turn founded the famous Moscow Art Theatre school, which in turn trained Sasha Marine. Regarding Aldridge, see Hankey 1997: 80-83, and Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock's *Ira Aldridge, the Negro Tragedian* (1958).

Since *Pericles* is one of the least familiar of Shakespeare's plays, the changes to the text in and of themselves did not frustrate the average spectator's attempt to follow the play, as very few people would have known the text well enough to be bothered by changes to it. They would certainly have recognized certain staging choices, however, as not being original to Shakespeare, such as the campy dance interlude in the brothel scene, choreographed to "Lady Marmalade." The vast majority of spectators enjoyed the play: asked if the play met, exceeded, or frustrated their expectations, 49 out of 60 (83%) said the performance exceeded their expectations, while only 6 out of 60 respondents expressed frustration. What is most interesting about the responses in this context, however, is the response to the question, "Do you think it is important to keep performing plays from the Shakespearean canon? Why/why not?" Only 2 out of 60 responded in the negative, and both of these were among the "frustrated" spectators[11]; and of the other 58 respondents the reasons given for continuing to produce Shakespeare fell into a predictable range: 34 out of 58 respondents (59%) referred to Shakespeare's cultural and literary value and/or the capacity of his plays to reflect "human nature," but only 6 (10%) referred to qualities of the plays themselves (eg. "great lines," "sheer entertainment value," "they are excellent in thought and flow," "wonderful stories") as a reason to continue producing Shakespeare, while very few referred to their function as plays. The words "timeless" or "classic" appear 14 times, and eight respondents comment on the relevance or universality of Shakespeare – despite the fact that *Pericles* is one of the least-known and perhaps most obscure of Shakespeare's plays for the contemporary spectator, and as one of his most improbable plots. Several other "yes" respondents gave no reason at all for continuing to produce Shakespeare, and some responded as if the answer were so self-evident that no rationale need be given: "Of course!" reads one. That the majority of respondents, when asked if it was important to produce Shakespeare's plays, gave reasons that had little to do with their theatrical value, or with theatre at all, suggests that most of them were responding to an idea or social construct of "Shakespeare" quite apart from his function as the author of the play, especially given that each respondent was in fact asked the question in the context of watching a play.

Also of interest are the responses of the four spectators who were frustrated, but still answered "yes" when asked if it was important to keep producing Shakespeare. As Bennett might have anticipated, they were frustrated by the *mise en scène*, which confounded their attempt to "read" the play a certain way. One complained about

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[11] And one of these was apparently unaware that s/he was watching a Shakespeare play; asked what s/he liked least about the play, the response was, 'The script. Who wrote this?' This may (one hopes?) have been intended as sarcasm.

"distracting dancing and music during speeches," and "speeches coming so fast upon each other [that they] interfered with my decoding of the speeches"; one laments "the celebration of style over substance"; one was critical of the sexual content, and one did not approve of the "brothel scenes": "I do not like slapstick Shakespeare; [they] weakened [the] entire play." Despite their condemnation of the *mise-en-scène*, however, they gave the same reasons for defending Shakespeare as those who enjoyed the performance: "Shakespeare is timeless, the playwright against whom all others are measured"; "lessons about history and human nature"; "they are universal, complex, and show us who we are and why."

I propose that the frustrated spectators judged the play to be "not-Shakespeare": their responses indicate a feeling that the intervention of these particular performers and director was unfaithful to their idea of the "real" Shakespeare. This is explicit in the criticism of the spectator who responded, "Have these actors and directors not come to terms with their sexuality that they feel the need to explore it still?!" This spectator puts the fault – the exploration of sexuality – on the performers, not the playwright; when asked if it is important to produce Shakespeare, the same respondent replied, "Of course, I love Shakespeare." The "Shakespeare" that this spectator loves is clearly not the playwright who wrote *Pericles*, which abounds with sexual and gender play; similarly, the spectator who objects to "slapstick Shakespeare" is not actually thinking of Shakespeare the playwright who wrote the objectionable brothel scenes, but of Shakespeare, the author of "timeless classics." In the case of *Pericles*, some spectators' conceptions of Shakespeare were so biased by literary and cultural baggage that even (or especially?) the scenes that were "faithful" to the original frustrate their expectations.

The "Shakespeare" that is challenged, abused, parodied, and re-written in *Mad Boy Chronicle* and *Harlem Duet* is this Shakespeare, not the dead playwright but the symbol of timeless classics, great literature, and universal human nature. For the most part, Western readers and spectators of Shakespeare have been taught that his plays embody the values of liberal Western humanism, and this is what they expect to find when they watch his plays. If their expectations are confounded, they tend to dub it either bad Shakespeare or "not-Shakespeare" (Bennett: 89).

In addition to the obstacle posed by a rigidly inscribed horizon of expectations, the strategy of challenging the Shakespeare Myth through innovative *mise-en-scène* raises another significant problem: novel stagings of Shakespeare, however effectively they challenge conventional readings, do little to encourage the creation of new works, and the viability of Western theatres and theatre communities is closely tied to its capacity for creating new works. As exciting as the Shakespeares of Peter Brook, Sasha Marine, and Jean-Stéphane Roy can be, no staging of any play "by William Shakespeare," however brilliant, contributes to the creation and dissemination of new Canadian plays, and Shakespeare plays already consume a disproportionate amount of the resources available to the Canadian Theatre. To resort once more to anecdotal evidence, according to Alberta Theatre Projects artistic director Bob White, the budget for *playRites*, the largest annual festival devoted to producing new Canadian plays, is approximately $400,000; the total budget for the 2000 Stratford season, by comparison, was $35,435,000[12]. There is, in addition, the phenomenon of the summer Shakespeare festival (of which Stratford may no longer be considered a representative example), such as Vancouver's Bard on the Beach or the Atlantic Theatre Festival in Wolfeville, Nova Scotia; in many cities this is the only theatre available in the summer months. As long as Canada's biggest and best theatres devote more of their resources to Shakespeare's works than those written in Canada, Canada's theatre, like Canadian culture in general, will be defined chiefly by its relationship to the master culture of its former imperial administrators. This problem extends to the academic production of Shakespeare, too; as Ania Loomba has pointed out, whatever positive changes and challenges to the Shakespeare Myth have come from recent criticism, such efforts are hamstrung to the extent that, by their obsessive focus on Shakespeare, they effectively reinscribe the very centrality that they claim to challenge. "[E]ven such alternative Shakespeares, to the extent that they maintain the myth of an endlessly pliable Bard … ironically undercut the effort to seriously re-think the place of Shakespeare" (165). If Canada's theatre wants to be regarded as more than a colonial outpost ("Home of the World's Second-Best Shakespeare Festival!") it must do more to emphasize the production of new plays, both in critical and theatrical practice.

If challenging the traditional Shakespeare's hegemonic hold on the stage cannot be satisfactorily accomplished through strategic stagings of Shakespeare's texts, because on the one hand it merely reinforces our obsession with Shakespeare, and on the other such productions will be rejected for the very reason that they disappoint traditional horizons of expectation – how can Shakespeare be re-examined, revised and re-visited *on the stage* the way he is being re-read *on the page*, in classrooms and academic discourse? Bennett, playing on an ambiguous spelling in *The Tempest*, suggests that a powerful strategy for *salvaging* Shakespeare's texts is to *savage* them, to "plunder them for aporias and blind spots" (Bennett 1996: 149). As an example of how this might be managed in theatrical terms as opposed to academic discourse, she points to Philip Osment's *This Island's Mine*, a "sa[l]vaging" of *The Tempest*. Like *Mad Boy Chronicle* and *Harlem Duet*, Osment's play is not an "adaptation" of Shakespeare, in the sense that it does not take the text more or less for granted and tinker with the setting, costumes, or names of the characters in the hope of rendering it more palatable to a contemporary audience. Rather, *This Island's Mine* lifts pertinent tropes and passages from *The Tempest* and puts them to its own use, staging a challenge to "the obligatory exile of those who contravene the codes of race, gender, class, sexuality, or nation" (Bennett 1996: 148). There is never any question about whether this is or is not Shakespeare: it is most assertively *not* Shakespeare, and therefore it sidesteps both of the problems discussed above. It foregrounds the voice of the contemporary playwright, rather than excluding it, and thereby contributes to the vivacity of the contemporary stage, not its morbidity. And because it does not claim to be Shakespeare or a supplement to Shakespeare, it does not risk a hostile encounter with a spectator's rigid horizon of expectations vis-à-vis Shakespeare and the associated risk of being dismissed as an inferior or flawed interpretation of the mythical Bard: it is neither bardolatry, nor can it be criticized for failing to bardolize.

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[12] In fairness, Stratford did produce one new Canadian play, Timothy Findley and Paul Thompson's *Elizabeth Rex*; on the other hand, this play was described in Stratford's publicity material as a 'remarkable encounter between William Shakespeare and his monarch' (*Stratford Festival of Canada 2000 'Groups and Schools Travel Guide'*: 7).

New Approaches to Appropriation

It is the emphatic "not-Shakespeare-ness" of *Mad Boy Chronicle* and *Harlem Duet* that makes them interesting to this study. We have already established that Shakespeare appropriation in and of itself is not a new practice, but the kind of appropriation carried out by O'Brien and Sears represents a relatively recent direction for Shakespeare appropriators; in short, exploiting Shakespeare's influence in order to refute it. This contrasts with past Shakespeare appropriations, which have been notable for the lengths they go to conceal ideological manipulation. Whether 17th century productions of *Julius Caesar* located tragedy in the demise of the Tory monarch or the Whiggish libertarians, for example, they always made a claim for their particular presentation as being the one that best represented Shakespeare's intentions (Dobson 1991). This has been equally true of the appropriation of Shakespeare in educational and academic contexts; as the work of Terence Hawkes, Catherine Belsey, Jonathan Dollimore, Alan Sinfield and others in the last 15 years has repeatedly shown, the history of the study of Shakespeare in academic contexts is inextricably wound up in both the creation of the discursive field of English literature and in the simultaneous process of the depoliticization of cultural productions by their identification as aesthetic or literary. To today's audiences and students, the aesthetic and the political are too often received as mutually exclusive, and the dissemination of Shakespeare in the figure of a transcendent genius who holds the mirror up to nature has been a part of this depoliticization.

O'Brien and Sears's works show that if Shakespeare can be appropriated to legitimize hegemonic ideology, appropriating Shakespeare may also *reveal* the conflict between ideologies. At the very least it challenges the received unity and finality of the master text. The appropriations discussed here overtly exhibit the spirit of abduction, theft, and seizure; they are appropriations in defiance of claims to propriety and to proprietary claims. They are knit together by loose contiguities of geography, nationality (allowing the problematic nature of this term), and time (having premiered between 1995 and 1998), but also by a common strategy: these plays appropriate for the purpose of exposing other, more covert forms of appropriation: the myths of Shakespeare's universal appeal to spectators of all backgrounds, of the intrinsic, unquestioned value of his plays, and of their elevation to an aesthetic, apolitical realm of literary privilege. Most of all they try to appropriate our illusions about Shakespeare, and thereby dispel them.

Like *This Island's Mine*, *Mad Boy Chronicle* and *Harlem Duet* do not attempt to update or recontextualize Shakespeare, nor to make his plays more "relevant" or "accessible," to recall two particularly problematic clichés about Shakespeare, frequently seen in program notes of contemporary Shakespeare productions. In fact, neither can be considered at all "faithful" to their discursive ancestors; one retains only the skeleton of a Shakespeare plot, the other, even less. Instead, they sa[l]vage Shakespeare's words and the Shakespeare Myth in order to engage the audience in a dramatic re-examination of our culture's obsession with Shakespeare and the things of which he has, for better or worse – and in spite of the scripts themselves – become emblematic: an aesthetic privilege for Art that transcends political and historical contingency; an equally transcendent autonomous human subject; and 37 plays (give or take) that faithfully and unfailingly reflect an unproblematic, monolithic Truth about the timeless nature of that subject.

Chapter 2 Mad Boy Chronicle

Mad Boy Chronicle has a problematic relationship with its Shakespearean parent text, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Michael O'Brien, its author, alternately exploits and contests his play's links to Shakespeare's. On the one hand, O'Brien's text lays claim to a greater authenticity than Shakespeare's by locating its origin not in *Hamlet* but in *Hamlet*'s source, the ancient Nordic saga recorded in Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum*; by returning the story to its Viking roots the text claims, in a sense, to be "the original *Hamlet*," or at least an atavistic rearticulation. On the other hand, it is the connection with *Hamlet*, not the "*Vita Amlethi*" recorded in *Gesta Danorum*, that draws the interest of readers and spectators, for all of them are familiar with Shakespeare's version, while very few will have heard of Saxo Grammaticus until they read the playwright's introduction in the playtext or the dramaturg's program notes. When I met Michael O'Brien, I was dramaturging and performing in *Mad Boy Chronicle* in Montreal, and I heard him express frustration that his play was treated as a Shakespeare spin-off, but even he calls it "my Viking Hamlet Saga" (9). *Mad Boy*'s relationship with *Hamlet*, then, parallels that of a rebellious son of a powerful family who has moved out of the family home in a huff, but still enjoys the privilege that comes with the family name. In this chapter, I will discuss O'Brien's appropriation both in theory and in practice; that is, I will try to establish that the play's "rebellion" against its parent text goes far beyond the superficial level of re-dressing *Hamlet* in a Viking motif, and I will also discuss the practical dramaturgical tactics used to parody the parent text, which are related to the Carnivalesque tactics often used by Shakespeare himself.

First, a summary of the play to give readers a general idea of where the various intertexts overlap and diverge. *Mad Boy Chronicle* contains allusions and elements of *Hamlet* that would be recognizable to anyone with even a passing familiarity with the latter text. The names may have been changed (the protagonist is now known as Horvendal, the antagonist is Fengo) or altered (the setting is Helsingor, the Danish spelling of Elsinore), but the similarities are inescapable: in the village of Helsingor in the year 999 AD, an angry spectre appears before a young Dane, claiming to be the ghost of his father, now seven years dead. The ghost commands the boy to avenge his murder, identifying the boy's uncle, Fengo, as the culprit. The boy, Horvendal, has recently converted to Christianity after finding a Bible in Fengo's plunder-sack (22), and is therefore reluctant to heed the ghost's claims, both because he does not want to believe in ghosts and because he is trying to reject the violent ways of his Viking heritage. Fengo tries to exile the boy because of his religion, but when Horvendal feigns madness, his mother Gerutha intercedes on his behalf and Fengo is forced to allow Horvendal to return to the village, though he suspects Horvendal's ploy ("He's shamming! I pulled this trick once meself!" (42)). Meanwhile, Lilja (Ophelia), the daughter of Fengo's crony Matthius (Polonius), experiences stigmata, and Gerutha has a vision of Mary, prompting both Fengo and Matthius to wonder whether the power of the Norse gods is waning. Still suspicious of Horvendal, Fengo and Matthius tie Lilja to a tree and order Horvendal to guard her, thinking he will try to free her and give himself away. He escapes the trap, and Fengo subsequently challenges him to a wrestling match, planning to cheat and kill the boy. Horvendal overpowers him, however, and is about to dispatch his uncle when Fengo prays to Christ for deliverance, prompting the unlikely appearance of a procession of monks. Shocked by Christ's apparent answer to Fengo's prayers, Horvendal can only watch as Fengo welcomes the priests, who announce that Helsingor, the last pagan backwater in Europe, must convert by New Year's Day. Fengo accepts, becoming a Christian king, and Horvendal, once exiled for his Christianity, is now exiled for his paganism. Fengo quickly discovers that Christian doctrine can be appropriated to expedite his tyranny, and a horrified Christ appears to Horvendal, urging him to kill Fengo and prevent the distortion of His message of peace. Horvendal's attempt to kill Fengo at the latter's baptism (an inverted parody of the scene where Hamlet decides *not* to kill the King at his prayers) is foiled, and a second attempt, at Lilja's funeral, concludes with Horvendal's impalement on a giant crucifix by one of the priests. The play ends with Fengo firmly in control, surrounded by corpses, exhorting the audience to beware Horvendal's example and to retell this tale "till the termination of the world" (150).

As an appropriation of *Hamlet*, *Mad Boy Chronicle* is a good example of what Susan Bennett invokes with the term "sa[l]vaging" (1996: 149). In seeming to savage *Hamlet*, it salvages the hidden "original" behind *Hamlet*, an ancient Danish saga that passed through many hands and many tongues on the way to Shakespeare. Although it is tempting to classify *Mad Boy Chronicle* simply as "a parody of *Hamlet*," this already institutes the AUTHOR / adaptor (or ORIGINAL / copy) paradigm that the act of appropriation always contests. And more importantly, classifying the play as "a parody of…" (or "a translation of…," or "an adaptation of…," etc.) implies that the appropriation is subject to the parent text, that it cannot function as a coherent sign-system (or combination of several sign-systems) unless the reader/spectator knows the master-code of the parent text and recognizes that the former is subject to the latter. To call *Mad Boy Chronicle* "the Viking *Hamlet*," for example, implies that *Mad Boy Chronicle* only makes sense, or only properly signifies to an audience conversant with *Hamlet*. An appropriation, I argue, does the opposite: it subjects the parent text to its own logic. In this discussion of *Mad Boy Chronicle*, I will demonstrate both its radical intervention in the signifying codes that guarantee the "meaning" of *Hamlet*, and the specific dramaturgical tactics at play in this intervention.

The chapter is divided into two main sections: in the first, I use structuralist and post-structuralist methodologies to show how the basic plot that all three stories share was ordered according to pre-Christian Nordic religious and cultural discourse; that in being recorded by Saxo and dramatized by Shakespeare, it was appropriated by the new Christian discourse; and that *Mad Boy Chronicle* subjects the Christian sign-systems at the heart of *Hamlet* to exposure, inversion, and ridicule[13]. In the second section, I discuss the dramaturgical tactics of appropriation employed in *Mad Boy Chronicle* in the context of Michael Bristol's *Carnival and Theatre*. My argument here is that Michael O'Brien's text is a "carnivalization" of *Hamlet*, a very specific kind of parody employing the dissenting tactics of popular festivities in early modern Europe.

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[13] Although there are, of course, many other Hamlet-texts in the history of appropriation, adaptation, and translation, including such diverse examples *Hamletmachine* and *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, this discussion must be restricted to the texts most closely tied to *Mad Boy Chronicle*.

Part One: Appropriation as an Intertextual Phenomenon

Originals, Appropriation and Authenticity: Who is the real Mad Boy?

In the playscript copy of *Mad Boy Chronicle* that I used as an actor in the 1997 production at McGill University, the play questions its own authorship/authority on the first page: "*Mad Boy Chronicle*. A Tale by Michael O'Brien. From *Gesta Danorum*, by Saxo Grammaticus c. 1200 A.D.[14]" (O'Brien 1995: 1). This assertion poses the question: does Shakespeare, despite his reputation as a genius of exceptional originality, have any real claim to authority over the story of Hamlet (or, for that matter, over any of his plots)? As William F. Hansen acknowledges in *Saxo Grammaticus and the Life of Hamlet*, "Shakespeare's" *Hamlet* is actually "a revision of a dramatic treatment (*Ur-Hamlet*) of a retelling ([Francois de] Belleforest) of a literary treatment (Saxo) of a Scandinavian legend" (1983: 67). The omission of Shakespeare's name from the record on O'Brien's title page is an implicit refutation of the latter's reputed originality.

The search for originals and sources in Shakespeareana is inevitably and problematically a paper trail, preoccupied with texts and not performances. "Inevitably," because literary criticism is biased towards literary evidence; "problematically," because most texts have non-textual origins and multiple sources. We cannot accurately call Saxo's account of the life of Amleth the original *Hamlet*, because it is itself an appropriation, a Christian literary appropriation of a Nordic oral text. Similarly, O'Brien lists many non-Shakespearean sources, including "Hrafnkel's Saga," Rosalind Miles' *The Rites of Man*, Robert MacNeil's *The Story of English*, and *Life Among the Wild Chimpanzees* by Jane Goodall (O'Brien: 8). In addition, both Shakespeare and O'Brien have non-literary sources and influences. But for the purposes of this discussion, the main literary influences of *Mad Boy Chronicle* are Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (ca. 1600) and the earliest recorded version of the story, books three and four of Saxo Grammaticus's *Gesta Danorum* (composed ca. 1200, published in Paris in 1514). Francois de Belleforest's Amleth story in his *Histoires Tragiques* is also important, since it is thought to be the link between Saxo and Shakespeare.[15] In order to distinguish these texts based on what they have in common and what, in each, constitutes an appropriation, I will adopt terminology developed by the Russian Formalists, described in Aston and Savona's *Theatre As Sign-System* (1991). Whatever the language, genre, or medium, these texts are tied together by their story – they are all variations of the same basic plot, or different *sjuzets* (plots, re-tellings) of the same *fabula* (story) (Aston and Savona 1991: 20-25). This schema distinguishes between the events or outline of the story and the way the events are organised and presented as a narrative. Central to structuralist thinking, and to the understanding of how appropriation works as a dramaturgical or narrative device, is the idea that the "meaning" of a tale lies not in the events of the *fabula* but in the structure of the *sjuzet*. Aston and Savona use the Oedipus *fabula* as an example: told as a myth, the story of Oedipus begins with the oracle before his birth and unfolds chronologically, spanning several generations. Sophocles' *sjuzet*, on the other hand, replaces "the linearity of the story-line with a plot which organizes the events of years into twenty-four hours . . . according to the exigencies of a dramatic form dictated by the clue-feeding, detective structure which shapes the plot of the tragedy" (21). The change in the structure and ordering of events accompanies a change in the text's ordering principles as well: the Oedipus *fabula* in myth performs a very different social and ideological function than in Sophocles' drama. The Hamlet *fabula*, similarly, has also performed many different roles in its numerous appropriations. In addition, the function of the *fabula* changes according to the conditions of performance and reception: both *Oedipus Tyrannos* and *Hamlet* had altogether different significance in their initial performance contexts than they do when read or performed in the 21st century.

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[14] The first page of the published version reads: '*Mad Boy Chronicle,* by Michael O'Brien, from *Gesta Danorum*, by Saxo Grammaticus c. 1200 A.D., and *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, by William Shakespeare c. 1600 A.D.' Shakespeare's name has been included in the retail version, then, but O'Brien and Saxo still get top billing. Except where otherwise noted, references to *mad Boy Chronicle* are based on the published editionof the play (1996), not the manuscript version (1995).

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[15] According to Geoffrey Bullough, the story found its way to the England via Belleforest, where it was adapted for the stage by 1589 (Bullough 1973: 13-15). Also, Hansen has pointed out that the appearance of the ghost in *Hamlet* is convincing evidence that Shakespeare's source was Belleforest or the *Ur-Hamlet*, not Saxo (Hansen 1983: 67).

The *fabula* at hand is the story of a young Dane who feigns madness as part of a strategy to avenge the murder of his father by his uncle, an aspect foregrounded in O'Brien's title. For this reason I refer hereafter to the "source" of all subsequent retellings as the Mad Boy *fabula*[16]. In all the versions examined here, the antagonist suspects the protagonist of feigning madness and subjects the latter to a series of tests; the protagonist detects and evades attempts at surveillance; and the protagonist delays action until favourable circumstances permit an attempt at revenge. Yet for all their similarities, each re-iteration of the basic *fabula* is tailored to suit very different aesthetic, social, and ideological contexts. Each time the *fabula* is appropriated for transmission to a new era, medium, language, or genre, the new author makes alterations in accordance with the demands or conventions of the new context. The first playwright to appropriate the tale for the English stage, for example, had to make major cuts, drastically compress the time frame of events, and so forth, just as the classical Greek playwrights had to be judicious in selecting episodes from the epics that were fit for dramatization. O'Brien and Shakespeare also take steps to flesh out the characters, so to speak, since characterization is of great importance in drama and romantic fiction, whereas the oral medium stresses action; secondary characters are rarely even given names and, having fulfilled their function in the plot, are usually discarded without further ado (Hansen 1983: 46-47).

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[16] The Mad Boy *fabula* is no more 'original' to Norse culture than the legend of the Flood is unique to the Old Testament: there are in fact Roman, Icelandic, and Iranian legends of avengers who feign madness to achieve their ends.

Changes to the form or structure of a text are necessitated by the demands of the generic conventions of each new appropriation, but it is naïve and dangerous to regard them as being merely superficial or aesthetic: appropriation involves alterations that are not only formal but also – or especially – ideological in nature. Critics and pundits like Brian Vickers and George Will, who locate Shakespeare and other parts of the literary corpus in an aesthetic sanctuary and regard appropriations – whether in academic criticism or in the theatre itself – as politically motivated corruptions or pollutions of the so-called original, ignore the politics involved in the creation of those originals, including *Hamlet*[17]. From Saxo to Belleforest to Shakespeare to O'Brien, each author to appropriate the story has adapted it to a new language or a new medium, but also to a new culture with different practices and a different horizon of expectations regarding the ideological role of the literary.

Saxo Grammaticus provides the first example of the appropriation of the Mad Boy *fabula*. A Danish monk, Saxo travelled through Denmark around 1200 CE, collecting the oral legends of the Danes and recording them in Latin. For the benefit of readers unfamiliar with Saxo's '*Vita Amlethi,*' I summarize the important events here with cross-references to parallel passages in *Hamlet* and *Mad Boy Chronicle*. In Saxo's *sjuzet*, the murderous Fengi slays his brother (Hansen: 97; cf. *Hamlet*: 3.3.36-38, *Mad Boy*: 36, 39), Orvendil, and assumes control of a large part of Denmark after marrying Orvendil's wife Gerutha (Hansen: 97; cf. *Hamlet*: 1.2.1-14, *Mad Boy*: 20). Gerutha's son by Orvendil, Amleth (known as Horvendal the Younger in *Mad Boy Chronicle*), feigns madness in order to a) spy on his uncle, and b) protect himself from his uncle's scrutiny and persecution while he plots his revenge (Hansen: 98; cf. *Hamlet* 2.1.180-81, *Mad Boy*: 44). Fengi suspects Amleth's cunning (Hansen: 98; cf. *Hamlet*: 2.2, *Mad Boy*: 44) and lays a series of traps for him. In the first, he puts Amleth together with a young girl and eavesdrops on them to see if Amleth will drop his disguise, but Amleth is wary and evades the trap (Hansen 98-101; cf. *Hamlet*: 3.1, *Mad Boy*: 52-55). Next, Fengi has his lackey hide in Gerutha's room to eavesdrop on Amleth and his mother when they are having a conversation, but Amleth detects the spy and kills him by stabbing the straw under which he is concealed (Hansen: 101-102; cf. *Hamlet*: 3.4). Finally, Fengi sends Amleth to the King of Britain in the company of two of his friends, bearing a letter to the King asking him to execute Amleth (Hansen: 103; cf. *Hamlet*: 4.3.41-72). But Amleth alters the letter so that his escorts are executed instead (Hansen: 103; cf. *Hamlet*: 4.6), and after a year-long episode in Britain, he returns to Denmark, where he kills his uncle and all of his supporters by great skill and cunning, and assumes control of his people[18].

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[17] See Kamps (1999).

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[18] My source for this summary is Hansen's translation of the Amleth story. Like O'Brien and Shakespeare, I have only included the pertinent episodes of a much longer saga. For the complete version, see Hansen (1983) 95-118. Another version is included in Bullough's *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (1973), Vol. 7, pp. 60-79.

This summary is an example of how the efficacy of a narrative lies in its *sjuzet*, not its *fabula*: my intention was not to entertain, but to point out similarities between the three plots, so although my "story" contains many of the same events and episodes as Saxo's, its intent and effect are markedly different. Saxo's story, too, although it may appear to be a transl(iter)ation, is designed to have a very different effect on a very different audience than the oral saga: in changing the form of the text, Saxo changes its ideological value. Nordic scholar Preben Sorenson points out that the saga as recounted by the Nordic skalds of pre-Christian Scandinavia was a part of a much larger body of orally transmitted discourse, a discourse which contained not only folklore and stories of the Nordic gods and heroes, but the entire cultural heritage of Scandinavia:

> It is important to understand that this poetry had a far greater importance in oral, pre-Christian society than literature has today: it was the principal way in which knowledge of ethics, religion, history, and political ideology, were transmitted in Scandinavian society. Sorenson 1997: 206.

The Nordic oral cultural practices, then, closely resemble what Louis Althusser calls "ideological state apparatuses"[19]. Althusser argues in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970) that a society needs certain institutions in order to ensure the reproduction of the means of production of that society. The main means of the production and reproduction of social practices, and therefore society, is through ideological apparati such as centralized education, religion, mass media, legal and political discourses, and so forth, but while we have today a much greater diversity of ideological apparati, the Vikings relied heavily on their oral cultural practices, the Eddic and Skaldic poems[20]. To grossly simplify Althusser's argument: the continued survival of Viking society required that the Vikings believed in their "Vikingness" and remembered to behave like Vikings; "Vikingness" and Viking ideology therefore needed to be constantly produced and reproduced. The *fabula* of the Mad Boy was a part of this discourse; therefore, although the original saga cannot be reconstructed, we can reasonably assume that it belonged to, was ordered according to the signifying codes of, and performed the work of a pre-Christian, Nordic ideological apparatus.

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[19] Granting, of course, that the concept of 'statehood' applies rather differently to prehistoric Danish society than it does to either Shakespeare's or our own.

Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, on the other hand, was a part of the discourse of the Christianization of Northern Europe, whereby pagan culture was not simply eradicated, but assimilated into the new Christian regime[21]. Scholars of Christian mythographers in Northern Europe have established that Christian mythographers, like Saxo and Snorri Sturlsson, have "shaped pagan religion on the model of Christianity" (Sorenson 1997: 207). Hansen, the most recent translator and commentator of "The Life of Amleth" presents convincing evidence that Saxo's translation of the oral vernacular saga into Latin literary form constitutes a form of cultural appropriation and even colonization. Hansen notes that efforts to translate the story are coloured by the writer's religious and cultural biases: "[p]ersons who have put traditional stories into writing have been as a rule less interested in recording oral storytelling than in making literature of one kind or another" (38). As a missionary of the Church, Saxo assumes a role quite different from that of a

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[20] It is worth noting that the diversity of ISAs in contemporary society is made possible by technologies we now take for granted, especially literacy – which Saxo had and the Vikings did not – and, increasingly, electronic mass media.

[21] For a general history of the conversion of Viking Scandinavia, see Preben Meulengracht Sorenson, 'Religions Old and New,' in *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Vikings*, ed. Peter Sawyer (1997), Oxford: Oxford UP, pp. 202-224. For detailed case studies on the conversion of Northern Europe, see Carole M. Cusack (1998), *The Rise of Christianity in Northern Europe, 300-1000*. London: Cassell.

Danish *skald* (bard), the result is a text that functions not as a performance or enactment of Nordic culture but as an attempt to rationalize that culture from a learned, European, Christian point of view (Sorenson, 227).

Hansen identifies several factors in the "conversion" of the Mad Boy *fabula* to Christianity, including Saxo's linguistic, and rhetorical choices. The decision to render the story into Latin, although necessitated by the lack of a Danish vernacular literature at the time, has a serious effect on the potential efficacy of the *fabula*, because the story depends upon wordplay, punning, and double entendre, and neither these nor native terms such as *jarl* (roughly equivalent to a feudal lord) are effectively translated by Saxo (Hansen, 40). Saxo's narrative style also has semantic implications: his adoption of the rhetorical conventions of classical Roman authors, including a rhetorical style dependent on "forced metaphors, laboured antithesis, sententious observations, exclamations of praise and reproach, and so on," and the inclusion of a running commentary of moralizations of the events, has the effect of greatly retarding the pace of the story (See Hansen, 40-43). Saxo's narration also *subjectivizes* the story to the narrator/author's commentary (41). Sorenson adds that even the decision to frame the myths and sagas as a part of a "coherently structured system" reflects the biases of a literary, Christian consciousness: the myths in their oral form were never presented as a coherent body of literature or history, only as interconnected fragments (208). The substitution of the refined, erudite, and hierarchic voice of cosmopolitan, Christian Europe, for the performance of the *skald*; and of an audience of solitary, educated European readers for the community of Nordic listener/spectators, alters the story's efficacy, transforming it from an oral performance into a quaint literary artefact. Where the oral performance was situated in the communal past of its audience and its teller, Saxo's narration locates his subjects in a distant, primitive past, far removed from both himself and his readers.

From Amleth to Hamlet

Saxo's text is part of a long process of cultural and religious colonization in Europe, a process that includes the appropriation of old beliefs and practices and their consignment to a distant, pagan past in order to make way for the Christian world order. Shakespeare's proximate source for the *fabula*, Francois de Belleforest, provides what is perhaps the most explicit example of this process. Belleforest takes long detours from his narrative to chastise the characters for their un-Christian behaviour and to remind the reader that the story takes place long "before the kingdome of Denmark received the faith of Jesus Christ," and that, therefore, "the common people in those dayes were barbarous and uncivill and their princes cruell, without faith or loyaltie, seeking nothing but murther" (from the 1608 English translation of Belleforest, Bullough: 85). Belleforest, who was mostly interested in the *fabula* as a sordid revenge story (Bullough: 11), is also significant as the source of certain changes to the plot that have been retained by both Shakespeare and O'Brien – namely the ghost of the slain king and the melancholy nature of the protagonist.

If the "Life of Amleth" is a Heroic epic, *Hamlet* is a revenge story, or rather a story of "justice without revenge" tailored to fit the Christian ethos. Shakespeare's appropriation of the *fabula*, like those of Saxo and Belleforest, translates the artefacts of pagan culture into a modern, Christian context. Some of Shakespeare's additions and alterations are the result of accomodating the *fabula* to the new medium (its third: from

Viking sage to Latin page to English stage), such as the compression of the plot in time and space, the use of devices such as character foils, the addition of sub-plots, and the general fleshing out of all the characters.[22] The most significant changes to the 'Life of Amleth' in Shakespeare's appropriation, however, are the ideological changes wrought by the grafting of a Nordic revenge plot into an English Protestant context.

Hamlet, like Hamlet, struggles with the emergence of the early modern Christian nation-state and the conflict between the Christian (and specifically, Protestant) ethos this state represents and the old heroic ethos it supplants. For Shakespeare's society, the climactic resolution of the Mad Boy *fabula* – the hero's bloody revenge – was problematic for at least two reasons: first, violent personal vengeance was no longer considered an appropriate way to redress personal grievances: "what in pagan society had been a right and a duty – first and foremost of revenge – was now made an offense against God and the king" (Sorenson: 224); second, the uncle in Shakespeare's version, unlike Saxo's, is a Christian King who is supposed to rule by divine right, and regicide was a volatile subject in Elizabethan society[23]. Fredson Bowers points out that, while revenge was certainly a popular topic on the Elizabethan stage, no one was allowed to get away with murder: "On the Elizabethan stage, blood demanded blood; and at most, only two or three tragic characters who draw blood for private motives survive the denouement, and then only at the expense of a retirement to the cloister for the rest of their lives" (1968 [1955]: 83).

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[22] Hansen argues convincingly that Shakespeare chose a specific location that would have been familiar to his audience (Elsinore was the site of the finest Renaissance castle in the northern world, completed in 1585) and peppers his script with references and traits – essentially stereotypical – that his audience readily associated with the Danes, particularly their reputed alcoholic excesses (see Hansen: 81-89). Furthermore, several of Shakespeare's colleagues in the Lord Chamberlain's Men had played in Denmark between 1579 and 1586, including Will Kempe, George Bryan, and Thomas Pope, so Shakespeare had a source of first-hand information about his Danish setting and subjects (Hansen, 89).

[23] According to Saxo, the Scandinavians did consider their kings to be descended from the gods (Cusack: 137); however, Saxo's usurping uncle character is not a king, only the *jarl* of Jutland, appointed by King Rorik, so his status is secular, not divine.

Shakespeare's challenge, then, is to dramatize a *fabula* about personal vengeance and regicide in a context where neither is acceptable to dominant ideology. Saxo and Belleforest, as literary narrators, have the option of locating their narratives in the distant past and commenting on the events and actions as they happen; the protagonist may commit barbarous acts so long as the narrators can explain them as the consequences of paganism. Shakespeare, however, sets his Mad Boy *sjuzet* in the Christian kingdom of Denmark, and his Hamlet, unlike Amleth, must temper his desire for Viking-style vengeance with his Protestant belief that Providence will bring about justice (Hansen, 75). Shakespeare dramatizes Hamlet's interpellation by the old pagan ethos in 1.5, where the old ideology is (dis)embodied in the form of the Ghost: "[h]is message is of revenge, a pagan concept deeply embedded in most societies but at odds with Christian teaching" (Bevington 1992: 1063b)[24]. "The Ghost's affiliations," says Mark Matheson, are "clearly with feudalism and the old religion," and as such the Ghost represents an order that, though it has been displaced, still exerts an influence (Matheson 1995: 385).

Hamlet's lust for vengeance (1.5.93-110) proves that he is still his father's son insofar as he responds to this influence, yet by making him a student of Wittenberg, Shakespeare presents him as a Protestant kind of Renaissance man (Matheson, 391); the pull of these conflicting ideologies, combined with the difficulty of bearing the burden of proof in his investigation, leads to Hamlet's famous indecision. Numerous theories have been advanced to explain Hamlet's apparent inability to act since the 19th century, but none before then, according to David Bevington, who concludes that earlier audiences were satisfied with the explanation given in the play, that Hamlet must first verify the Ghost's accusations, and then figure out how to exact revenge without premeditating murder (Bevington, 1062a). Hamlet first chastises himself for doing too little (2.2.550-588), but then when he does act, he does so in error, killing Polonius. He recognizes that killing Polonius is heaven's punishment for both of them: "heaven hath pleas'd it so, / To punish me with this and this with me, / That I must be their scourge and minister" (3.4.180-82). Matheson describes Hamlet as being "in the throes of an ideological unhousing from both the residual and dominant cultural systems of Danish society" (389), and argues that only "the emergence of a specifically Protestant discourse of conscience" breaks his impasse.

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[24] The Ghost represents the waning influence of the old pagan Danish culture that generated the story in the first place. Where Saxo contributes to the colonization and suppression of pre-Christian Scandinavian culture by objectifying and 'othering' it in his translation of the 'Life of Amleth,' Shakespeare paradoxically makes present the absence of the old Danish culture by embodying it, but in an incorporeal form.

Hamlet's epiphany is brought about by his miraculous escape from death at sea, which causes him to realize that "he must become the instrument of Providence according to *its* plans, not his own" (Bevington 1992: 1064a). Upon his return, he perceives "a divinity that shapes our ends" (5.2.10) and puts himself at the disposal of that divinity. The revenge that seemed impossible to plan "seems elementary" when Hamlet entrusts himself to Providence: his father is avenged without murder and he is "relieved of his painful existence without having to commit suicide" (Bevington, 1064a).

Hamlet has also been read as proof of Shakespeare's Catholicism, agnosticism, Anglicanism, and so on (Matheson: 383), and Hamlet has been criticized by Bradley, Battenhouse, and Voltaire as essentially pagan in his fatalism (Sinfield 1980: 89, Fleissner: 102), but as I have already noted, these objections date from well after Shakespeare's era. As Sinfield says, *Hamlet* is a Christian play "in the Elizabethan sense of the term," and if this seems troubling today it is due to a "shifting concept of Christianity" (Sinfield 1980: 94a). Although I read *Hamlet* here as performing the part of an Elizabethan ideological state apparatus, I don't mean to argue that it cannot also be read as resistant to or subversive of dominant class values, nor do I suggest that "dominant class values," either Elizabethan or contemporary, are cohesive or monolithic[25]. My argument is not that *Hamlet* supports dominant Protestant ideology, necessarily, but that this ideology, and not the old Nordic cultural codes, informs Shakespeare's *sjuzet* and that *Hamlet* is, therefore, a Christian appropriation of the Mad Boy *fabula*.

Hamlet to Horvendal

Mad Boy Chronicle is both appropriation and counter-appropriation. It subjects *Hamlet* and the discursive practices in which *Hamlet* participates (the theatre, the literary, high culture, etc.) to critique, and simultaneously contests the appropriation of the Nordic saga by the imperial culture, by restoring the pagan Danes to the text and exposing the process by which they have been erased from subsequent appropriations. O'Brien's symbol for the forces of imperialism in *Mad Boy Chronicle* is the Christian Church. By setting the play in the midst of the Scandinavian conversion, O'Brien dramatizes and makes explicit the process that is concealed in the appropriations of the story by Saxo and Shakespeare, personifying the ideological apparati through which the old order is efficiently replaced by a new order in a process driven as much by coercion and convenience as by spirituality and salvation.

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[25] Yet, as a play that could only be performed with the sanction of court officials, they at least, must have seen the play as exemplifying dominant class values.

The play is set the last days of 999 AD, on the eve of the conversion of Denmark to Christianity[26]. The Danes represent the last Europeans to be converted, and Helsingor represents the last of the pagan Danes to be brought into the Christian empire[27]. At the outset of the play, a lone Viking singer establishes the setting in the Viking world by singing an excerpt from the *Song of Hávamál*, an important Nordic text framed as the word of Odin himself (a reference which, I concede, most spectators will not know) (13). Throughout the first half of the play, numerous characters invoke the power of Odin and Thor, and in one scene Gerutha cites the *Song of Hávamál* to resolve a dispute (58). Generally, O'Brien represents Viking society as harsh and savage; Fengo, the chieftain (and analog to Claudius), is obscene, capricious, and violent, and rules by threats and intimidation, and in scene 2 he is introduced to us in the middle of demeaning and bullying a thirteen year-old girl. His rule over Helsingor is clearly oppressive, but it is just as clearly upheld but by social practices, not merely by the threat of violence. First, Fengo, like other Danish lords, is an elected leader, accountable to the Freeman's Assembly, which is about to hold elections (40); second, Fengo, though secretly the murderer of his brother, the former chieftain, claims that he was elected by "the Thunder-god hisself" when Thor struck down his deceased brother (20). If this seems suspicious to us, it is certainly enough evidence for the Vikings, who worship Thor. However unjust, Fengo's rule is supported by the majority of the Vikings and is (to their knowledge) in conformity with their practices. Anna and Inga, the old fisherwomen who act as the play's chorus, agree that as bad as Fengo is, he is at least no worse than his predecessor, and Gerutha goes a step further when she tells Horvendal, "Fengo's a bunnyrabbit next to yer Paa!" (111). Finally, Fengo's power, though considerable, is limited by the same ideological apparati which confirm his position: when, in scene nine, Fengo and Matthius catch the supposedly mad Horvendal with fish gaffs and Matthius orders the Viking warriors to kill him, Gerutha invokes *The Song of Hávamál*, Odin's own words, to stop the attack:

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[26] In reality the conversion of Denmark was a gradual process, but the official date is 965, which marks King Harald Bluetooth's baptism (Cusack: 145). O'Brien chose the turn of the millennium to reflect upon the current period (Personal conversation with the author).

[27] Shakespeare, not Saxo, introduced Helsingor/Elsinore as the setting – Saxo's version is located in Jutland – yet Helsingor's position at the northern tip of Denmark makes it a fitting location for a town represented as being on the periphery of the Holy Roman Empire.

> What sort of Norsemenn are you?
> What sort of leader lets this pass?
> Beatin on cripples, on poor defenseless children,
> ……………………………………………
> It is written – on Odinn's Mighty Stone,
> The Song of Havamal, which all of you should know –
> That he who raises sword 'gainst fool or cripple
> Is doomd to die a Coward's Death;
> And never ever enter the Hero's Afterlife –
> But suffer his victim's affliction – forever! (58)

Helsingor, then, is by no means a utopia, but neither is it without social and moral codes. Fengo's power is both confirmed and limited by the ideological apparati of Viking culture.

The alternative to Fengo's brutality is embodied in young Horvendal, surviving son of the previous lord of Helsingor. When we are introduced to Horvendal, he is praying to Jesus, whose word he has discovered in a Bible that has turned up in Fengo's "plundersack" (22). The Vikings ostracize and ridicule Horvendal, and when he preaches the word of the "Godd of the Meek," his uncle Fengo replies, "Show us these Meek. Let me at them. We'll soon see who inherits what" (24). O'Brien's choice to make Horvendal the lone Christian, combined with the choice to make him "14 years old, short, and scrawny," combines the difficulties faced by the protagonist in other *sjuzets*: like Amleth, he is young, alone, and powerless, and, like Hamlet, he is committed to Christian principles, making violent revenge both physically difficult and morally unfeasible. Horvendal's literacy and Christianity are analogous to Hamlet's education at Wittenburg, the center of Protestant thinking. In both texts, the protagonists' intellectual and philosophical predisposition makes them outsiders in their worlds. Exiled from Helsingor, Horvendal resolves to walk to Jerusalem (unaware of its distance or actual location), but is quickly confronted by the ghost of his dead father, Horvendal the Elder. The ghost reveals, of course, that Fengo murdered him, and demands that the son take revenge. Like Hamlet, Horvendal's Christian faith renders him reluctant to believe in ghosts and unfit to take vengeance, but although he renounces his father's Viking ways ("Viking am I not, Viking I'll not be, etc.": 26, "I renounce you father!": 36), his confidence is shaken by the absence of any signs from Christ, so he returns to Helsingor to discover the truth, feigning lunacy to protect both himself from harm and to conceal his real purpose:

> Horvendal who out was flung,

Has gott you, Fengo, by the tongue!
For dogs have ears and fools have eyes,
That see men's secrets, hear through lies.

……………………………………………………

Oh hide, my witts, till all I see;
Till then a Madd Boy must I be! (44)

Horvendal's reappearance in Helsingor coincides with a number of strange incidents involving Christ, who begins to appear in visions and dreams. In one incident, Matthius and his daughter Lilja (Ophelia) see a huge flaming cross in the sky while gathering firewood, and Lilja is afflicted (blessed?) with stigmata, prompting Matthius to flee to town in terror (52-55). Once there, he delivers a hysterical speech to the Vikings about the impending terror of Christ, and incites an abortive attack on Horvendal. Later, an ecstatic Gerutha reports a visitation from Christ's mother: "She's comin, Fengo, comin to this Land, / She and her Sonn, who some call Jesus Christ. / And all of Denn-Mark will take her by the hand, And Light will shine, where only there was ice!" (76).

The disturbances caused by the Mad Boy (including the embarrassment caused by Matthius' attempt to have Horvendal killed), and the apparent contagion of Christianity, cause Fengo considerable anxiety, especially in light of the impending election. His distress over the appearance of a new god is not theological in origin, but strictly political: he perceives the new religion as a potential threat to his power, for he cannot tyrannize his subjects effectively if they adopt the Christian belief in an eternal soul. Eventually he questions his own spiritual affiliations: "Great Odinn – wisen me. Show me what to do. / Faill me nott – or I'll wage Warr on you!" (78).

When his traps fail to expose Horvendal, Fengo dispenses with tact and takes Horvendal out to a remote area, where he challenges Horvendal to a wrestling match, then cheats by using a concealed weapon. Surprisingly, Horvendal – whose faith in Jesus is shattered by the latter's failure to show any sign of favour – gets the better of Fengo, but just as he is about to take his "Viking vengeance," Fengo cries out, "JESUS, GOD OF MERCY hear my plea – / Deliver me from this Boy! JESUS! JESUS!" and suddenly a procession of chanting monks appears, complete with "*cowbells, crucifixes, and holy relics*" (s.d. 84). When the monks appear – as if in answer to Fengo's prayers – they separate the combatants and announce that they have come to convert Helsingor, mistaking Horvendal for the barbarian and Fengo for the pious Christian. The first act concludes with Fengo inviting the monks back to town for feasting and ale, leaving the incredulous Horvendal to wonder at Christ's timing and leaving the audience to wonder at the sudden departure from the familiar *Hamlet* plot.

At the top of Act II, the Church's colonization of Helsingor is exposed as part of a political shift rather than the advent of a new, enlightened age. After explaining that King Rollo has promised to make the Danes Christian in exchange for land and "tribute" from the French, the priests make it clear that conversion is not a spiritual matter (87). Explaining that the glory of Christ is being enforced by the military might of recent convert King Rollo, the priest Paavo explains how the Lord protects his faithful:

> E'en as we speak, Fengo, Jesus Christ impends.
> His Knights of the Purple Cross sweeps North!
> Lord Thorstalf, your neighbour, he refusd our clerics;
> Lo and behold, Fengo, his house burnd down. (88)

Fengo embraces the new system, sensing that he can appropriate it to reinforce his hold on power, shaken by recent events. If the monks are guilty of *realpolitik* in backing Fengo's tyranny in order to establish Christianity, Fengo quickly proves that he is more than a match for them at this game. When Paavo explains the ways of Christ, Fengo instantly misappropriates his words, selecting an interpretation that suits his needs:

> PAAVO: Jesus said, love thine enemy as thy self.
>
> FENGO: Aye, that'd throwem!
>
> PAAVO: He said, judge not, lest ye be judged.
>
> FENGO: Aye, no judgin' Fengo!
>
> ……………………………………………………………………
>
> FENGO: Punishments! Punishments! Yuz gots t'have punishments boys. Whatve ye gott?
>
> PETRI: Why --
>
> PAAVO: Penances Fengo.
>
> PETRI: Excommunication.
>
> PAAVO: Depending on the Severity of the Sinn.
>
> FENGO: Depending on the Severity -- of Fengo. Ha haaaa! (89-90)

Fengo immediately begins to exercise his new divine authority over the souls of his subjects. He no longer needs Gerutha to legitimize his claim to his dead brother's lands, since Christianity does not recognize her rights to hold land, and so he excommunicates her and leaves her to die. The process of change is remarkably efficient: by the next scene, the dragon-head posts on either side of the stage, symbols of the Viking gods, have had beams nailed across them to make them into crosses. When Horvendal reappears, he finds Anna and Inga, the old women on the margins of the town, rushing to be baptized and confessed, because they have heard that "Jesus murders all sinners with a Hammer," and he "specially hates … old wimmen" (92).

The conversion of Helsingor to official Christianity, ironically, proves utterly devastating to Horvendal, the first convert. Distraught by Christ's apparent desertion in his hour of need, he forsakes Jesus and resigns himself to Viking vengeance:

> Jesus, treachor-godd, spurn'd us all along!
> Fengo's rook'd you! Christ, you took his side!
> But I shall stitch my vengeance-capp with
> Fengo's Danish hide. (93)

He attacks Fengo at the latter's baptism, but is thwarted again by the intervention of the priests in an ironic inversion of 3.3 in *Hamlet*. There, Hamlet considers killing the king at his prayers, but finally delays rash action. Here, Horvendal hears Fengo's confession and takes action, but is thwarted by the priests, who denounce Helsingor's first Christian as a savage (105-7). Horvendal and Lilja, who began as the bearers of the true message of Christ, lose their faith and resort to violence, having been even further marginalized and disenfranchised by the change that was supposed to liberate them. Even Jesus – "*the real JESUS*," according to the stage directions – is so disillusioned by the results of the conversion that he is driven to advocate violence:

> Ohh Horvendal: my shining shatterd Angell.
> How you failed me! Failed my Path of Love.
> Ohh my Hope-Child, how I tried to reach you!

> All is soiled now. Listen to your Christ:
> Turn Ye Back – Save my Strangled Gospel.
> Turn Ye Back – Go mend the Harm they've don.
> Slay thine Uncle! Go take thy Viking Vengeance!
> Stop him! Stop him! Oh Poisoned Love-Truth!
> Turn Back and Slay that Mann! (135)

The priests, Paavo and Petri, having been outflanked by Fengo, are also disillusioned. They have few alternatives since Fengo, however he disgusts the priests, is essential to them; as Paavo says, while refusing to baptize the dying Gerutha, on Fengo's orders, Fengo "is God's gateway to the Danes. / Without his might, our influence is naught" (132). Eventually they become corrupt, filling the void left by Matthius's death as Fengo's cronies; in scene 28 they are at his side getting drunk at Gerutha's wake and laughing at his jokes. A complete reversion to savagery is suggested in the final scene when Petri impales Horvendal on a giant cross, screaming, "So die all murderers" (148). Ultimately, the Church is exposed as validating of Fengo's tyranny instead of establishing an enlightened new order; instead of leading the way to liberation, the Church consolidates tyranny.

Horvendal's death (by crucifixion, more or less) at the hands of a Christian monk confirms the perversion at the root of the conversion. Christianity, in the form espoused by Horvendal early in the play, seeks to suppress violence, encourage peace and love, and offer eternal freedom to all followers. But the arrival of the official emissaries of the Church merely replaces a localized system of oppression with an imperial system: Fengo, formerly a local strongman, is now a tyrant sanctioned by King Rollo, the Pope, and

"God" and the power to "hex-communicate" extends his jurisdiction from the temporal realm to the eternal. Conversely, Fengo's oppressed subjects, who were guaranteed a certain amount of protection, or had adapted strategies for survival, under the old system, are now thoroughly disenfranchised. The victory of the Christian Church does not represent a victory for Christ, but suggests that the Christian Church, meaning organized religion or any other supposedly emancipatory ideology, is not a new order but a new integument for the old oppressive order.

In the last century, especially since the popularization of Tillyard's "Great Chain of Being," it has been common to read Shakespeare's plays, including *Hamlet*, as beginning with disorder, or rupture, and concluding with the restoration and reaffirmation of order: the characters wake from their dreams, the Duke returns from exile, the usurper is dispatched, or the sickened state of Denmark is restored to health, paving the way for a new and improved regime to begin. But Fengo's abuse shows that the new order is not more civilized or more enlightened, only more powerful and more efficient. The conclusion of *Mad Boy*, which leaves Fengo in command, surrounded by the corpses of his opponents, is vexing and inconclusive; instead of offering restoration and harmony, the play denies the audience the comfort of leaving the theatre secure in the belief that God, the government, the clergy, or anyone else, is looking after them. And perhaps most importantly, in attempting to restore the voice of the ancient Danish skalds to the text, appropriated by so many in the intermittent centuries, O'Brien sa[l]vages the imperial canon to unearth its roots in the marginal Other.

Part II: *Mad Boy Chronicle* and the Carnivalization of Literature

In the first section, I focussed on the intertextuality of appropriations; now I would like to shift the discussion to O'Brien's dramaturgical practice, the actual tactics employed in the appropriation of *Hamlet*. The play is clearly parodic, an ironic inversion – or sa[l]vaging – of the heightened language, serious tone, and philosophical sensibilities commonly associated with Shakespeare and *Hamlet*. Yet it is not *Hamlet* that O'Brien holds up to the mirror, but the audience's idea of what *Hamlet* should be. *Mad Boy Chronicle* is a carnivalesque parody: its use of crude language, grotesque imagery, and the un-crowning of symbolic authority – all major categories of the carnivalesque as discussed by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* – distinguish *Mad Boy Chronicle* as a carnival critique, or carnivalization, of *Hamlet*, or more specifically of the social construction of *Hamlet* and the theatre in general as symbols of class, learning, and elite culture.

In *Carnival and Theatre*, Michael Bristol explores the relationship between theatre – especially Elizabethan and Jacobean English theatre – and popular culture in early modern Europe. Arguing that contemporary theatre studies are compromised by the subordination of "theatre" to the literary interest of texts, Bristol shows how the theatre of the 16th and 17th centuries was, by contrast, a privileged site for the celebration and critique of the extra-literary needs and concerns of the plebeian classes (Bristol: 1985, 3). In the early modern period, Bristol argues, the Elizabethan theatre functioned as a form of popular festivity, like the carnival, subjecting the symbols and rituals of authority to travesty and parody in order to bring them into a familiar relationship with common experience and achieve a "de-crowning" of *de jure* power relations (22). Bristol examines theatre as a form of popular festivity, like the carnival, whose major concern was not with "durable literary values," but with immediate, material needs of the community, a medium for the "consideration of forms of collective life and of subjectivity other than those proposed and legitimated by a hegemonic culture" (4-5). Following Bakhtin, Bristol identifies several important categories in the carnival debasement of symbols of authority enacted by the Elizabethan theatre, including the "language of the marketplace," the grotesque body, and the presence of a mock-king, clown, or Lord of Misrule (67).

The Elizabethan theatre represented a real threat to *de jure* authority; for this reason the authorities sought to curtail its influence by any means available, from pamphleteering to forcibly closing the theatres. Eventually, to survive official surveillance and persecution, the theatre had to become an official institution, and as a result it diminished as a forum for popular culture[28]. In the intervening centuries theatre has become, as Bristol puts it, "an essentially moribund social form"; it is largely concerned with dominant or elite class values and is no longer a potent site for the struggle of conflicting ideologies precisely because it draws its audience almost exclusively from the bourgeois and educated classes (Bristol 1985: 24). Once a part of the oppositional culture of carnival forms, the modern Western theatre is now a part of official culture; instead of opposing dominant values, it now most frequently claims to uphold them, and Shakespeare, or rather the Shakespeare Myth, is its foremost icon.

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[28] See Bristol (1985): 118-120 for an account of how Shakespeare's contemporary, Ben Jonson was instrumental in the process of de-politicizing theatre.

> Though they resonate with carnival elements and were once ambiguously situated in relation to competing ideological discourses, Shakespeare's plays have been reconstructed as canonical monuments to the elite values of enlightenment, education, and literature. The challenge for contemporary readers of Shakespeare is the recognition and recuperation of un-canonical status, learning to read (and view) Shakespeare without succumbing to the filter of literary prejudices that have since come to dominate our conception of what Shakespeare's plays mean (Bristol: 8).

Ironically, Shakespeare's accession to exalted status has both diminished the carnivalesque efficacy of his plays and enabled the carnivalization of the Shakespeare Myth. Now that Shakespeare has been reconstructed as the chief icon of the dominant class values he once critiqued in his plays, the same strategies he once employed may be put to use on him. If Shakespeare's plays once de-crowned authority, *Mad Boy Chronicle* de-crowns the authority of the Shakespeare Myth. In *Mad Boy Chronicle* both Shakespeare in particular and the theatre in general are carnivalized, subjected to a de-crowning manifest at the level of abusive language, the grotesque body, and the inversion of symbolic authority. The appropriation of Shakespeare in *Mad Boy Chronicle* is a carnivalization of literature, a performative interrogation of the values Shakespeare has come to symbolize.

Perhaps the most potent aspect of parody in *Mad Boy Chronicle* is the carnivalesque mockery of authority through the inversion of its official symbols. In Renaissance Europe, both secular and clerical hierarchies were regularly displayed in symbolic form in official pageantry and religious ceremony (Bristol 1985: 59). Official pageantry makes visible, by allegorical representation, "ranks and categories of the social structure, idealized in mythological, historical, or biblical images"; such processions make "the ideals of the social order objectively present in the here and now" (59). Every official procession had a carnival counterpart, which appropriated and inverted the symbolic order of its official counterpart: "[c]ivil and social ceremonies and rituals took on a comic aspect as clowns and fools … mimicked serious rituals" (Bakhtin: 5). In official processions and pageantry, "authority presents itself as the … naturally elevated agency of changeless, already perfected and complete, reality"; as such, these processions rely on the idea of a fixed relationship between symbol and referent (Bristol: 61-2). But the very use of such symbols in a public display "frustrates and confuses the desire to protect valued symbols from both inadvertent and wilful misinterpretation … To display such a symbol in the public square is to invite quotation, and therefore misquotation, and abusive mimicry" (63). Official pageantry attempts to fix a "real" relationship between sign and referent, but the strength of signs – the "power to generate surplus meanings," so that a crown represents more than "a fancy hat" – is also their weakness, because the appropriation of official signs and symbols in un-official contexts reveals that the link between symbols and their referents is not fixed, but contingent and arbitrary (63). And if a valued symbol is exposed as contingent and arbitrary, then the naturalness, permanence, and stability of the authority for which it stands are also thrown into doubt. Contrary to the official use of symbols of rank (such as crowns, liveries, and coats-of-arms) to fix the order of things, carnival misuses the same symbols to expose the "arbitrary transitoriness" of all social forms and social order: "in Carnival a crown *is* just a funny hat, and a funny hat, or some even more inappropriate object, is a crown …

Carnival masquerade displays the impermanence of any relationship between an individual and the social identity claimed by the symbolism of his clothing" (65).

Carnival spectacles appropriate the symbolic economy of their serious, official counterparts, in which rank and order are assertively displayed to symbolize a divine order. What is ridiculed is not the signifier (the crown itself, for example), but the authority that it signifies: "insignia of rank and identity, and all other symbolic manifestations are mimicked or misappropriated for purposes of aggressive mockery and laughter" (Bristol 1985: 63). Similarly, if *Mad Boy Chronicle* is seen as the carnival counterpart to the "official" symbol of *Hamlet*, what it appropriates is not Shakespeare, *per se*, nor *Hamlet* itself; the target of *Mad Boy Chronicle*'s carnival de-crowning is the cultural authority that Shakespeare and *Hamlet* represent.

Abusive Language

The elevated language of dominant class discourses is a popular target for de-crowning in all carnival forms. Carnivalesque critiques mock the complicated syntax and specialized vocabularies of law, religion, bureaucracy, and so on in order to expose them as a means of mystification, a way to fence these discursive fields off from the uninitiated (i.e. the plebeian classes). Bakhtin comments on the long tradition of liturgical parodies in Europe (14), and also notes that Rabelais, too, writing in a world where "the line of demarcation" between official and popular culture "was drawn along the line dividing Latin from the vernacular," frequently parodies the "latinizers" (Bakhtin 1984 [1965]: 465-69). Shakespeare himself frequently un-crowns specialized or latinized discourse; he often shows common people mocking the over-elaborate jargon of the dominant classes, or shows how fools pretend to greater authority than they actually command by affecting a fancy vocabulary, with the unwitting result of obscuring or even inverting the intended meaning. Bristol locates an example of the former type in *Hamlet*'s gravedigger scene, where the clowns mangle the Latin of official legal discourse in their mock trial: "argal" for "ergo," "*se offendendo*" for "*se defendendo*", etc. (Bristol 1985: 188-90); and Polonius' confused catalogue of dramatic genres (2.2.396-400), which makes obscure what it seems to elucidate, is an example of the latter.

There are several examples of this kind of parody in *Mad Boy Chronicle*, often involving Fengo's deliberate misappropriation of biblical verses, but O'Brien's subversion of exalted and official discourses also de-crowns the language of Shakespeare. Shakespeare's complicated language, with its specialized syntax, its archaisms, its daunting vocabulary, and its metrical rules, is an obvious target for subversion because it is among the main criteria that are used to set Shakespeare's texts apart from all others. Indeed, since most people are introduced to Shakespeare through reading and analyzing his work in secondary and undergraduate English classes, he is generally better known as a poet than as a playwright.

The unfortunate effect of Shakespeare's rhetorical skill in terms of contemporary reception is that his plays are hard to read, hard to speak, and hard to follow on stage for contemporary readers. And just as law, philosophy, and medicine are discourses restricted to those that have the resources to master their language, Shakespeare is a discourse accessible only to the initiated. In fact, as Alan Sinfield argues in his study of the appropriation of Shakespeare in Britain's educational system, Shakespeare's construction as a universal and national poet makes his plays useful in the construction of students as members of a particular class. Students are taught that great literature is accessible to everyone because of its universality, and are thereby "persuaded to accept appropriate attitudes to Literature as a criterion of general capacity" (Sinfield, 1985: 160). Having been taught that literature is universal – when in fact, as Sinfield argues, it is only a particular cultural code and response to it is not universal but based on class and gender – students come to internalize their success or failure with literature as an absolute judgement of their capacities as human beings (160). Sinfield presents statistics suggesting that those who succeed in mastering literature and Shakespeare are far more likely to continue to post-secondary education and professional careers. Those who fail, according to set standards, or who do not find their experiences reflected in his "universal" genius, are likely to feel they have failed to grasp something which, they have been conditioned to believe, is a basic precondition of humanity itself. In this way, literature – a discursive category whose practices and boundaries are, as Sinfield demonstrates, guaranteed by Shakespeare – is another example of sophisticated language being used to establish and maintain class boundaries.

Frustration and anxiety with Shakespeare's difficult language is often articulated in popular appropriations and parodies of Shakespeare, as Gary Taylor witnessed one evening at the improvised comedy performance by John Monteith and Suzanne Rand:

> On the night I saw the show, the audience suggested Chicago, Al Capone, a toilet seat, and "Have a nice day." Monteith and Rand then improvised upon these details, a scene "as if written by Shakespeare." The result was screamingly funny, but I did not hear a single quotation from Shakespeare; his style was suggested,

> instead, by acrobatic contortions of grammar, the occasional "alas," odd "doth," and frequent "thee," incongruous mixtures of orotund polysyllables and street slang, and a singsong approximation of blank verse. (Taylor 1999: 203)

Taylor's experience illustrates how a contemporary audience recognizes "Shakespeare" as a difficult combination of archaism, "polysyllables," and verse. The episode is also a striking example of carnival: a collective audience uses mockery in order to bring the exalted (Shakespeare) back into a familiar relationship with daily life, and the solidarity of the community is realized by its common laughter[29].

The crass language and graphic obscenity of *Mad Boy Chronicle*, like Monteith and Rand's improvisation, is less an attack on Shakespeare than on the construction of Shakespeare and the theatre itself as a symbol of "proper" speech, high art, cultural pretensions, and effete academia. The mystifying language of Shakespeare is exposed and de-crowned by a profane parody of Shakespeare's poetics. O'Brien's linguistic debasement of Shakespeare is manifest in many levels, from dialect to a perfusion of profanity, to metric form. The suspension of the ordinary rules of order and decorum in literature (and theatre) applies not only to the play but to the playscript as well: O'Brien's note informs us that "spelling, punctuation, and syntax are erratic to suggest emphasis, dialect, and state of mind" (11), violating the rules of English itself. The text is peppered with neologisms ("piddleprophet," "fesitvitatin";" etc.) and non-standard or inconsistent spelling and grammar, so that it resembles a Quarto or Folio version of Shakespeare, composed before the "rules" of English were firmly set in place. The result is a lively, anachronistic, obscenity-laced brogue with an indeterminate accent[30]. In his review of the play's premiere, Martin Morrow notes that "[m]ost of the actors talk in mongrel accents that sound much less … Danish than a kind of bastard Irish," but then again, as Morrow goes on to say, "authenticity clearly isn't the point here" (*Mad Boy Chronicle*: 153). What is important is that the dialect is clearly far removed in both vocabulary and in sound from the Standard English accent conventionally used by Shakespearean actors.

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[29] Improv comedy is an area for further study of the relationship between carnival and theatre because of the attenuation of the boundary between the performers and the audience. This boundary is the critical difference between carnival festivity and theatrical spectacle. As Bakhtin says, 'carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it…' (7). At improv comedy and Theatresports, however, the boundary between spectator and spectacle is relaxed, effaced, or even abolished, as direct, verbal and semantic input from the audience is critical, and spectators may be asked to participate individually on stage, or, as in Theatresports, to collectively act as a judge in the competition between teams. Furthermore, such events attract a different audience constituent than 'mainstream theatre,' due to various social and economic factors. As such, improvised theatrical events may provide a closer approximation to the medieval carnival than conventional theatre.

The Vikings' dialogue in *Mad Boy Chronicle* is liberally laced with neologisms and obscenity (and obscene neologisms, like "cockwhallop"). In this respect, of course, O'Brien pays tribute to Shakespeare, who had a distinct talent for using and coining abusive language. But since Shakespeare's flair for profanity, lamented by later critics like Johnson and Dryden, is not a part of the socially constructed Shakespeare experienced by high school students and Stratford subscribers, O'Brien's use of abusive and profane language has the effect of uncrowning the Shakespearean material – ironically, Shakespeare is now subject to debasement by the same obscenity he once used so capably in passages like the oft-cut, "O Romeo, that she were, O, that she were / An open-arse, and thou a poppering pear!" (*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.1.38-9). Also, where many of Shakespeare's obscenities have fallen into obscurity or become laughably archaic

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[30] O'Brien's dialect also resembles the 'retro-Jacobean' dialect used by Peter Barnes in *The Bewitched, Red Noses*, and other plays.

("poppering pear," "Zounds," "strumpet," etc.), O'Brien's profanity is not likely to go unnoticed: it commences in the first scene, when the initially fearsome appearance of the ghost of Horvendal the Elder – ten feet tall in the McGill production, accompanied by drums and giant wolves – is comically deflated by the old women, Anna and Inga, when they shower him with verbal abuse until he relents:

> INGA: Hoy sister – look we gots company.
>
> ANNA: Here piss off, we're tryin' to eat.
>
> INGA: Go on then, have ye nothin' else to do? Be off with ye! Off I say!
>
> ANNA: Ruffian! Hedge-hogg!
>
> INGA: Arse-manglin curr!
>
> ANNA: Aye, go cockwhallop someone's else!
>
> INGA: That's tellin' him!
>
> *INGA throws a snowball. The GHOST vanishes.* (15)

The comic bathos of the scene is augmented by both the slightly displaced nature of the profanity ("arse" for ass and "shite" for shit) and by the breach of decorum that occurs when two old women – already portrayed as pathetic and helpless – swear with sufficient ferocity to dispel a menacing 10-foot tall ghost, who is clearly attempting to be terrifying.

In order for carnival debasement to be effective, of course, the spectator must be able to connect the carnival performance to the official discourse that is being mocked. This requirement is partially met in *Mad Boy Chronicle* simply by swearing on stage, as in the scene above, because high standards of decorum and heightened diction are part of the semantic economy of the contemporary theatre. In addition, the profanity of the language works in combination with formal conventions to establish the connection to

Shakespeare that is necessary for carnival debasement to be effective. Much of *Mad Boy Chronicle* is written in blank verse, which, though frequently irregular, follows iambic pentameter just enough to make the connection to Shakespearean verse. This connection is augmented where the meaning of the words clearly parallels or echoes *Hamlet*. For example, compare, *Hamlet* 2.2.605-6 – "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" – with *Mad Boy Chronicle*: "The Baptism's the place, / Where I'll rubb Viking Justice in his Face!" (93). The combination of metric precision (or at least, a measured imprecision) with the unruly dialect creates the rhetorical equivalent of a travesty: the poetic structure normally associated with the exalted diction and genteel manners of the stage is de-crowned by the insertion of obscene and un-poetic words and phrases. It is difficult, as always, to assess the extent to which such a strategy is effective in performance; Martin Morrow's comments below suggest that the play's blank verse structure is not perceptible to the listener, but he recognizes the connection between profanity and metric form in *Mad Boy Chronicle*'s effectiveness: "Writing in a crude, obscenity-pocked prose, with occasional snatches of simple, sing-song verse, O'Brien amusingly debases the exquisite poetry of Shakespeare" (*Mad Boy Chronicle*: 153).

The more closely the language resembles Shakespeare's – or a recognizable "Shakespearean" cliché – the more pronounced the effect of de-crowning. For example, in scene six, Matthius (Polonius) sees his eldest son off on a whaling trip with some advice reminiscent of Polonius's famous (and famously-misquoted) "Know thyself" speech in *Hamlet* 1.3. But when O'Brien abridges the speech to reveal the limp tautology at its core – "But don't do nothin' stupid will ye hey son? It int wise"– the direct allusion to the well-known theatrical cliché enhances the de-crowning effect (*Mad Boy Chronicle*:

29). In this example, the deflation of exalted language reveals that beneath Polonius's elevated diction, and by extension beneath much literary bombast, the universal truth and wisdom hidden in the mystifying language of literature is often much less impressive than it sounds. Horvendal's parody of the graveyard scene is another example. In the middle of a monologue that reduces Hamlet's famous existential musings to a rather whiny "Why me?" Horvendal trips over a wolf skull and then begins to talk to it: "I nae knew ye. I can guess ye well. / Where your doggish soul went, there should Horvendal. / Howso died ye, sure it served ye right" (130). By repeatedly reducing great moments in the history of Western drama to crude clichés, *Mad Boy Chronicle* implies that at the heart of the Mad Boy *fabula*, before Shakespeare made the language complex and obscure, there is a relatively uncomplicated tale of revenge to which any audience can relate. O'Brien strips the mystifying veneer of poetry and literary criticism surrounding *Hamlet* to suggest that at the bottom of it all is a simple story that can be summed up in his tongue-in-cheek dedication of the play "to all those who dream of slaughtering their Stepfathers" (7). By debasing Shakespeare's language, *Mad Boy Chronicle* performs the work at the heart of all carnival forms, bringing the symbolic *Hamlet* – the mystified and mystifying icon of cultural authority – back into a familiar relationship with popular culture.

The Grotesque

Grotesque realism is another of the familiar features of carnival found in *Mad Boy Chronicle*. A term used by Bakhtin to describe the preoccupation of popular festive forms and literature with exaggeration of the flesh, excremental and scatological humour, and bodily functions, grotesque realism is another tactic used to bring the exalted back to earth and transfer "high ceremonial gesture or ritual to the material sphere": "all … forms of grotesque realism degrade, bring down to earth, turn their subject into flesh" (Bakhtin 1984 [1965]: 20). Grotesque realism is closely connected to abusive language, of course, as "the grotesque concept of the body forms the basis of abuses, oaths, and curses" (Bakhtin: 27). This much has already been exemplified in some of the language quoted from the play, which is based on exaggerated sexual imagery ("cockwhallop"), bodily function and excrement ("Hie off, you Fengo-fucker," 26), the conflation of human and animal features ("doggyskull'd," 68), and images of disarticulated and "unsightly" parts of the body ("arse-manglin curr"). Grotesque realism can be both verbal, where it acquires an indexical function and visual, in which case it is iconic. The former transgresses the conventions of appropriate speech, and the visible grotesque body transgresses conventions of what is appropriate to display. Just as the contemporary stage is constructed as a place for proper language, so is it constructed as a place for the display of bodies that are beautiful, appropriate, or "suited to the classics" as Stratford's web site puts it. As a visible breach of decorum, the grotesque body is thus to the visual register what obscene language, an audible breach of decorum, is to the verbal register.

In *Mad Boy Chronicle*, the grotesque is most potently embodied, as it were, in Fengo, who is described in stage directions as "very huge and very drunk, covered with food, [wearing] an eye patch" (18). Fengo's predisposition to excess in all bodily matters – eating, drinking, sex, etc. – is a dominant motif in the play. In his first scene, he is shown at a feast, molesting a 13 year-old girl (Lilja) and then pouring beer over her.

When she resists, he has his men hold her down, then forces her to look in his empty eye socket:

> FENGO: Have ye ever seen Fengo's Hole? Fengo show yez Fengo's Hole. Nasty dirty eyesockett, nothin inside! Look, prettygirl, look!
>
> *FENGO pulls off his eye patch and opens his eye socket. Lilja screams.*
>
> Look's a bit like a rabbit's bum, don't it?
>
> GERUTHA: Fengo stop –
>
> FENGO: Why art afeard, girlie? It's a good honest Warr-Wound! Hoy Matthius – Matthius look! *(MATTHIUS cringes.)* Haaa haaaa – (19)

Fengo's graphic display of a body part normally concealed for the sake of decorum (or in this case, the unsightly absence of a sightly body part) coupled with the conflation of human eye-socket and animal anus, is a manifestation of the grotesque that breaks decorum not only in the world of the play (or so we infer from the characters' reactions) but potentially in that of the theatre; the scene is both comic and revolting.

The conflation of the grotesque with symbolic authority in the figure of Fengo debases and materializes authority, bringing it out of the realm of the exalted. Fengo's violations of decorum are varied and colourful, usually involving or combining the sexual and the scatological. When, in scene 16, Matthius offers Lilja's hand in marriage to curry favour, Fengo stalls, mindful of the new rules of the Church: "Whoa! Hold yer horses, prettygirl, hold yer horses! We'll get married, nae ye fear, soon as the Church okays it.

Gotts to flush out the pottie afore ye shits in it again, right Matthius?" (96). In this instance, Fengo's memorable equation of the Church's control of sexual relations with latrine protocol, and of women with excrement, degrades the authority of the Church and brings the sacred bond of marriage down to the material plane. The episode makes it brutally explicit that the Church's sanctification of marriage does nothing to alleviate the objectification and oppression of women; the misogyny of Viking society is not remedied by the new ideology, only rephrased.

The grotesque is also manifest in the old women, Ana and Inga, who eke out a living on the margins of society, ignored by all but their fellow exiles, Horvendal and Lilja. The extent to which they are rendered grotesque or unsightly depends on the choices made in performance, of course, but the evidence is in the text, which describes them with terms like "ancient" (13), "old biddy," "old pagan," and "old crone" (28), and which assigns them a large share of the play's most obscene language. Martin Morrow describes the Anna and Inga of the ATP production as "ragged old crones," which suggests that they invoked the grotesque in that staging, and in the McGill production Anna and Inga were given a variety of grotesque touches, including conspicuous warts and a greasy "rabbit" (chicken) to tear apart and eat in the first scene[31]. The presentation of Anna and Inga, like Fengo's misogyny, draws attention to the cruelty and ostracism that they suffer in their community, a situation that Christianity does nothing to remedy.

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[31] It is worth noting in passing that feast-hall and banquet imagery and images of excessive eating and drinking, which dominate scenes 1, 2, 14, and 28 of *Mad Boy Chronicle*, is also a staple of the carnivalesque, so to speak. In this case the use of excessive feasting and drinking seems to be mainly to symbolize a) the contrast between the powerful and the poor, by showing Fengo feasting while Anna and Inga fight over a stolen rabbit or share a pot of boiled seaweed; and b) the corruption of the monks through alcohol: in scene 14 they appear ambivalent about Fengo's offer of ale, but in scene 28 Paavo is clearly drunk. The grotesque feast-hall imagery is a detail of the text that may either be nullified or amplified in a specific performance, as well. In the McGill production the consumption of food and ale was made conspicuously grotesque by the presence of greasy chickens, but no utensils; while I cannot recall what ATP did with the feasting imagery, the decidedly gastronomic language of Martin Morrow's review ('slobbering,' 'meatier,' 'juicy,' 'thirst for revenge,' 'spilling forth bubbling comedy like an overturned hogshead of wine') suggests that there was something gustatory in his experience (*Mad Boy Chronicle*: 152-3).

Clowning and (De)Crowning

The most important aspect of O'Brien's carnivalesque dramaturgy, and also his most critical departure from carnival, is in his use of Fengo as a mock-king or Lord of Misrule. The Lord of Misrule is at the heart of the carnival, guiding the subversion of order that is central to popular festive forms. In carnival, transgression becomes the law, and an essential element of popular festivities is the "reversal of hierarchic levels: the jester proclaimed king, the clownish abbot, bishop, or archbishop was elected at the feast of fools" (Bakhtin: 81). The role of the clown-king, both in carnival festivity and on the stage, is manifold. Bristol catalogues the clown's functions as the discovery of laughing matter, the disclosure of the contiguity between the carnival world and the "real" world and, most importantly, the demystification and exposure of authority by strategic misunderstanding (Bristol 1985: 140-45). Shakespeare's familiar Lords of Misrule include Falstaff, who mocks all authority and role-plays Hal's father (both in symbol and literally in *1HIV* 2.4.369-432). Bristol also includes darker examples, such as Iago, who skilfully guides the chaos and misrule of *Othello*[32]. In *Mad Boy Chronicle*, the Lord of Misrule, clearly, is Fengo. O'Brien follows carnival conventions by using Fengo to travesty authority, but he diverges significantly from the carnival tradition by leaving Fengo in control at the conclusion of the play.

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[32] See Bristol (1996), 'Race and the Comedy of Abjection in *Othello*,' in *Big-Time Shakespeare*, London: Routeldge, pp. 175-202.

Like other carnival clowns, Fengo finds laughing matter through his lack of guile and subtlety. Instead of concealing the oppressive motives of authority in lofty rhetoric or diplomatic finesse, he uses his power openly and liberally, exposing authority as essentially cruel and self-interested. As a rude, indecorous, and physically grotesque figure endowed with the power and authority of the Church, Fengo's blatantly self-interested appropriation of the symbols and rituals of authority expose folly and transgression as "the covert reality of rational government" (Bristol: 67).

Fengo's most potent weapon as a carnival clown is his capacity to strategically misinterpret religious discourse and render it into laughing matter, which both debases it and exposes its real use in legitimizing his own tyranny. Laughter here, as in all carnival forms is not trivial, but critical to a new way of perceiving the world and the oppressive role of authority in it. By revealing the abuses of authority and the ease with which it can be critiqued, laughter "purifies the consciousness of men from false seriousness, from dogmatism, from all confusing emotions" (Bakhtin: 141). Fengo's ridicule of the Church's literature and symbols of authority, similarly, brings them down from their exalted position and exposes a paucity of substance behind the façade of seriousness. When the priests first show Fengo their huge Bible, he is impressed, not by the authority of the Holy Scriptures, which he cannot read, but by the grisly pictures of the crucifixion, which appeal to his sadistic sensibilities (89).

In the same scene, Fengo discovers the Church's most powerful punishment ("hex-communication,"), but his refusal to treat the ritual with religious solemnity – or even pronounce the word correctly – debases and demystifies the word and its authority. His mis-pronunciation carries a connotation of superstition ("hexing"), suggesting that the practice is essentially no different from the pagan practices the Church officially abhors. Fengo's subsequent perfunctory announcement of the conversion of Helsingor makes clear that the adoption of a new faith signifies little more than a new veneer over the old idols: "Let the statues of Odinn be cut down, / Let great crucifixes be erected in their steads! / Tell yer Christian bosses Fengo wants aboard!" (90)[33].

In addition to tactics such as the inversion of authority and the mockery of exalted practices and materials, the scene exemplifies the carnival tactic of comically exposing the role of exalted symbols in worldly oppression. Within moments of his "conversion," Fengo begins to dole out and rescind "hex-communications" with relish and spite, blatantly bartering eternal salvation for personal favours. His first act as a Christian is to "hex-communicate" his own wife, since he no longer needs his marriage to her to legitimize his power, and later he barters Matthius' soul in exchange for Lilja's hand in marriage (94-96)[34].

Once Fengo realizes the utility of religious discourse in oppressing his subjects, he becomes an expert at perverting Christian teachings to his own devices though strategic misquotation. His abuses of biblical verse show how the most apparently pious doctrines play a potent role in legitimizing *de jure* authority. When Ragnar returns from his whaling trip to find his father dead and his sister missing, Fengo harnesses his Viking rage with his own version of the wisdom of Ecclesiastes:

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[33] In the McGill version, the expedience of the ideological make-over was emphasized by the insertion of a comic dumbshow, in which clownish Viking carpenters initially refuse to deface the sacred dragon-head totems, but are quickly persuaded by the promise of money and the threat of beatings to nail perpendicular beams across them, turning them into crucifixes.

[34] Under Viking law, Gerutha was recognized as the legal owner of her deceased husband's lands, another of the checks on Fengo's authority that the Church allows him to circumvent. (See *Mad Boy Chronicle*: 20.)

> FENGO: Easy ladd easy, this here's a Christian land.
>
> We gots to take the Boy, legally.
>
> Administer the punishment, slowly and deliberately.
>
> This here's the Christian Way.
>
> RAGNAR: The Christian Way?
>
> FENGO: Aye, it's a New Age, innit? To everythin;' there be a season, To every season a meaning.
>
> RAGNAR: What?
>
> FENGO: A time for warr, ladd, and a time fer hate.
>
> A time for fightin, and a time fer dying;
>
> A time for combat, a time for wrangling,
>
> A time for torture, a time for hackin out spleens – (116)[35]

Fengo continues his debasement of biblical verse when he baptizes Ragnar to make him a "Christian Soldier":

> FENGO: The Lord is my shepherd what I don't want,

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[35] Compare the original:
There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under heaven:
a time to be born and a time to die,
a time to plant and a time to uproot,
a time to kill and a time to heal,
a time to tear down and a time to build,
a time to weep and a time to laugh,
a time to mourn and a time to dance,
a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them,
a time to embrace and a time to refrain,
a time to search and a time to give up,
a time to keep and a time to throw away,
a time to tear and a time to mend,
a time to be silent and a time to speak,
a time to love and a time to hate,
a time for war and a time for peace.

> He maketh me lie down in green water.
>
> He deploreth my soul, my cupp runneth over,
>
> For we walk in the shadow of death forever, Amen.
>
> RAGNAR: What the fuck was that?
>
> FENGO: I just made you a Christian Soldier. Whatever ye do, from here on in, ye do on behalf of the Lord Jesus Christ, understand?
>
> RAGNAR: Lord who?
>
> FENGO: The fella I been talkin about!
>
> RAGNAR: Oh yeh, yeh right. (117)

Fengo's crass appropriation of Christian doctrine and rhetoric comically demystifies religious discourse and reveals its use in authorizing and legitimizing certain forms of violence on behalf of the state; Ragnar's reaction shows that as long as everything stays essentially the same, adopting a new religion is only as complicated as learning a new name. Later, though, Ragnar shows that authority can be imperilled by genuine faith. At Lilja's funeral, he throws his sword on the pyre, swears never to bear arms, and incites "all fighting men" to follow his example; Fengo's response ("Oh fuck, not another one," 146) sums up the Christian King's worst nightmare: that his subjects will begin to take their faith too seriously.

The carnival parody of the authority of Church also shows how the appropriation of Biblical doctrines enables the ruling class to maintain its monopoly of political power. Before the priests arrive, Fengo's rule is subject to various checks and balances guaranteed by Viking custom, such as regular elections and Gerutha's legal ownership of the lands he rules. Once baptized, however, the Lord of Misrule is consecrated as a Christian lord for life. As such, he no longer needs to use outright violence to hold power, since as a Christian ruler his dominion extends over his subjects' afterlives. In addition, the baptism scene shows how the new religion allows the crimes of the powerful go unpunished. When Fengo finally concludes his comically lengthy confession of horrible crimes – during which he pauses several times to chuckle in delighted reminiscence – he adds, as if in afterthought, "Oh yeh – plus I smashed me brother's brains," giving the concealed Horvendal the crucial piece of information he needs to take his vengeance (105). But when Horvendal leaps out of his hiding place, he is restrained: now that Fengo has confessed, he is forgiven, and although Horvendal has proof, vengeance is no longer the appropriate course. Not only is Fengo not held responsible for his crimes, he actually gains an honorific, and is known thereafter as "Fengo the Confessor."

This brings me to O'Brien's most marked departure from familiar carnivalesque structure, which is also his most important departure from *Hamlet*. Carnival festivities, which begin with the election of a mock-king who (mis)guides the transgression of order, are concluded by the return of *de jure* authority and the overthrow/beating/un-crowning of the Lord of Misrule. Carnivalesque dramas, on the other hand, most often contain their own internal mechanisms for restoring legitimate rule and the order of daily life. *Hamlet*, for example, begins with the discovery that the king of Denmark, as a regicidal usurper, is in fact a sort of mock-king, and concludes with his un-crowning, clearing the way for a return to legitimate order in Denmark. Yet the conclusion of *Mad Boy Chronicle* not only finds the lord of misrule still in command, it finds him more powerful than ever, and legitimate order, represented by the Church, does not un-crown him, it symbolically *crowns* him by baptizing him as a Christian king. Herein lies what is perhaps the most potent aspect of O'Brien's appropriation: its use of a familiar *fabula* to construct and then confound the spectator's horizon of expectations.

O'Brien's construction of a particular horizon of expectations begins with his first allusions to *Hamlet*. The moment spectators discover that Fengo has married his brother's wife after the latter's death by mysterious circumstances they identify him as the Claudius of this version of *Hamlet*[36]. Once he or she has identified *Mad Boy Chronicle* with *Hamlet* and Fengo with Claudius, the spectator begins to decode the play according to a horizon of expectations that is based on his or her prior experience with *Hamlet*. That is to say, the spectator begins to expect that Fengo's misdeed will, like Claudius's be uncovered and avenged by Horvendal, allowing the restoration of justice and legitimate order to Helsingor. Spectators who have learned to read Claudius's evil as the source of the rottenness in the state of Denmark will, similarly, read Fengo's comic misrule as the central problem in *Mad Boy Chronicle*, and expect the play's resolution to turn on the un-crowning of the false king.

The first half of the play seems to confirm this expectation. At the beginning of the play, the balance of power is such that neither Horvendal nor anyone else can challenge Fengo. But when Christ begins to appear in the visions and dreams of certain characters, Fengo's increasing apprehension leads the spectator to suspect that the arrival of Christian order will be the decisive factor in turning the tables against Fengo. Fengo's overconfident ridicule of Christ in scene two, and throughout the first act, seems to be setting him up for a fall: "Go find yer Lord Jesus – tell him Fengo says he's a woman! Tell him nobody never nail'd the Thunder-Godd to no cross!" (23). The spectator is thereby led to expect that the lord of mis-rule will ultimately be uncrowned by the symbolic "real" ruler, Jesus. When Christ's representatives finally do appear, however, the results confound these expectations. Instead of un-crowning the carnival king and reinstating justice and order, the Church mistakes Fengo for the rightful ruler and then finds *itself* subverted and un-crowned by him. When the monks confirm the false king's authority instead of stripping it away, the spectator's expectations for the play's resolution through the intervention of a greater cosmic order, based on their prior experience of *Hamlet*, are thwarted, and the spectator is forced to look elsewhere for meaning in the play.

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[36] Fengo's explanation that Thorr 'struck him down with a mighty meteor' may be taken at face value by the Vikings, but it is clearly a clue to the audience that foul play was involved..

The Dissident Hamlet

The dramaturgy of appropriation exhibited in *Mad Boy Chronicle* shares a great deal with that of its textual predecessor, *Hamlet*. Both texts are appropriations, and both put their parent texts to a particular ideological use that, if it is more obvious in the case of *Mad Boy Chronicle*, is no less significant in that of *Hamlet*. The key difference, of course, is that Shakespeare's Mad Boy story has traditionally been received as an "original," not an appropriation, whereas the reception of *Mad Boy Chronicle* is heavily influenced by its audience's prior experience with *Hamlet* and Shakespeare[37].

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[37] Ironically, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* may have been made popular in its time by its own appropriation, not of Saxo but of the Ur-Hamlet and certain theatrical conventions. Polonius' catalogue of genres and the Players depend on an audience's familiarity with the theatre in general, and numerous critics have argued that Shakespeare is satirizing specific plays or playwrights in *Hamlet*.

O'Brien's use of carnival tactics, such as the obscene debasement of sacred language, the grotesque body, and the debasement of symbols of authority through the intervention of a mock king, provide an example of a dramaturgical strategy of appropriation. Although it is not, of course, authentic carnival, and differs from Bakhtin's understanding of the function of popular festivity in several important ways, the play is certainly carnivalesque both in its particular mechanics and in the general sense that it debases a symbol of exalted authority and brings it into a familiar and material relationship with its audience. Perhaps its most important deviation from carnival, though, is in Fengo's victory: traditional carnival festivity always ends with the un-crowning and beating of the mock-king, the restoration of the order of daily life. But at the end of *Mad Boy Chronicle*, Fengo is still in control; in fact, his hold on power is more solid than ever and his rivals have all been destroyed. Leaving Fengo in command at the conclusion of the play forces us to ask whether rule ever triumphs over misrule, or whether there is even any difference.

The most important aspect of O'Brien's appropriation of Shakespeare is the use of the familiar *Hamlet* plot in order to create a misleading semiotic frame for the spectator to decode the text, only to shatter that frame half-way through the play and thereby establish the appropriation's critical difference from the parent text. In the second half of the play, *Mad Boy Chronicle* diverges radically from *Hamlet* when the conflict between Fengo and Horvendal is overshadowed by the extension of mis-rule into the authority that is supposed to restore order to the play, and it is here that O'Brien stages his most powerful assault on our horizon of expectations. Its Shakespearean frame shattered, *Mad Boy Chronicle* shows that, while the return of *de jure* authority may bring order and resolution – whether it is represented by Fortinbras, by the Church, or by Shakespeare himself – it also restores cruelty, injustice, and hegemony, and is not to be blindly applauded.

Chapter 3 Harlem Duet

Just as *Mad Boy Chronicle* is paradoxically both *Hamlet*'s Viking ancestor and its post-modern offspring, *Harlem Duet* is both a descendant of and a prequel to *Othello*: although the setting is modern, the plot recounts events antecedent to those of the parent text. Fischlin and Fortier sum up the story quite eloquently when they describe it as contemporizing the Othello story "in relation to its American setting, while also showing the historical sweep of the motivations and emotions of the characters as they struggle to deal with the twin variables of race and sexuality in three different temporal moments" (Fischlin and Fortier: 287a). The setting is Harlem, "at the corner of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X boulevards" (*Harlem Duet*: 17); the protagonist is Billie, Othello's first wife; and the story begins shortly after Othello announces that he is leaving her for a White woman and shortly before he marries her. Like O'Brien, Sears challenges Shakespeare for ownership of a particular *fabula*, but her tactics are quite different; *Harlem Duet* is not a parody, nor is it in any sense carnivalesque. As such, it provides an interesting contrast to *Mad Boy Chronicle*, and a wholly different approach to the activity of appropriation. Sears's objective is not to parody Shakespeare's cultural authority, but to reconstruct the *fabula* from a point of view that is excluded from both *Othello* and the history of criticism and appropriation of *Othello*, that of the Black woman. *Othello*, as many critics have noted (see especially Callaghan: 1996), addresses the fears and anxieties of a White, male audience, and it has been appropriated by Black and female actors (eg. Paul Robeson, Ellen Terry), critics (Callaghan, Loomba, etc.), and writers (Baraka, Ellison, etc.) to represent their experiences of interracial sexual relationships, but Sears is perhaps the first author to address both gender and race, revisiting the story to show the effect of miscegenation on the Black woman and her community.

Like other rewriters and appropriators of *Othello*, Sears's point of attack is the binary overcoding of the *fabula*. Both in the presentation of Othello and Desdemona as a union of opposites – male/female, old/young , Christian/Moor, Black/White, etc. – and in the contrasting and antithetical imagery throughout the play, *Othello* is encoded in a binary either/or logic. Since *Othello* was written for and has mainly been performed in front of White audiences, and contains only one Black character – who is, significantly, employed by the White society of Venice to battle against an imaginary non-White enemy of the state – the White/Black binary coding of the play invites the spectators to identify with the White society represented by Iago, Cassio, Brabantio, etc., and to view Othello as the Other. Sears, while retaining the conflict at the core of the plot – the coupling of a Black man and a White woman – both speaks from and addresses an African Canadian, female experience, and in *Harlem Duet* she inverts the Self/Other coding of *Othello* so that Otherness becomes White, not Black. My objective here is to identify and discuss the strategies she uses in her appropriation, including the manipulation of dramatic space, the deployment of the familiar trope of miscegenation, and the construction of a particular spectatorship.

Other(ed) Othellos

Recounting the experience of sexual betrayal from a Black woman's point of view is not Sears's only motive, of course. As Leslie Sanders says, though *Harlem Duet* only skirts the edges of *Othello*, "it disturbs utterly how we will experience *Othello* forever after"

(Wilson 2000: 557). I will begin this discussion by putting *Harlem Duet* in the context of *Othello* and the recent history of appropriations of *Othello* that attempt to expose and negotiate cultural, sexual, and racial difference.

The debate over race, gender, and culture in Shakespeare's *Othello* (itself an appropriation of a story in Cinthio's *Hecathommithi*) is by no means settled. *Othello* has been read and performed as a racist text, as a text that critiques contemporary attitudes toward race and alterity, and, occasionally, as being not about "race" at all. Some see Othello's Blackness as signifying a generalized Otherness that is not only or specifically racial, while others insist that the play is inextricably bound up with specific discourses of race (and gender, and empire) that precipitated its production[38]. Michael Bristol, for example, argues that Elizabethan audiences, identifying Othello's blackface with that of carnival, would have perceived the play as "a comic spectacle of abjection" rather than a tragedy. Bristol claims that *Othello* did the cultural work of a *charivari*, and that modern critics, in the attempt to recuperate Othello as a tragic hero, ignore the elements of "racial and sexual persecution" in the play (Bristol 1996: 175-202). I will not attempt to resolve whether *Othello* is racist; instead I discuss *Othello* as a play that, in the words of Dympna Callaghan, "dramatizes the possible consequences of not excluding the racial other from the community"[39] (1996: 215).

Interpretations and appropriations of *Othello* can be said to turn on the interpretation of Othello's line, "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul!" (5.2.1)[40]. What is "the cause" of the tragic outcome of *Othello*? Is it the blackness of Othello's skin? Is it the racial and cultural differences that such blackness signifies? Is it White fear, hatred, and resentment, exposed in Iago's machinations? Or is it Othello's self-loathing as a marginal member of society that makes him vulnerable to Iago? Dramatic and critical appropriations of the text have long been preoccupied with offering their own explanations of the possible causes – and effects – of violent and unhappy conclusions to interracial sexual liaisons in the context of a supposedly cosmopolitan society[41]. Charles Fechter, playing the role in the 1860s, would gaze at his reflection in Desdemona's hand mirror as he delivered the line, to signify that Othello's skin, its blackness, was "the cause," and for a long period of time when *Othello* played in front of exclusively White audiences, no other reason needed to be given (Hankey 1987: 70).[42]

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[38] Two important events which helped form the context of reception for the first performances, but which are not appreciated by the average contemporary spectator, include a state visit by a Moorish ambassador in 1600 and the banishment of all Blacks from Britain by Queen Elizabeth. See Peter Fryer (1984), *Staying Power: Black People in Britain Since 1504*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.

[39] If nothing else, Shakespeare gives his audience more credit than Cinthio, whose heroine Disdemona laments that, 'Italian ladies will learn by my example *not to tie themselves to a man whom Nature, Heaven, and manner of life separate from us*' (*Othello*: 380, italics in original). When a similar sentiment is expressed in Shakespeare's *Othello*, it is uttered by the villain, Iago, in the context of planting doubt in Othello's mind (See *Othello*, 3.3.232-242.). Brabantio, too, makes similarly racist remarks while pleading his case to the Senate.

Since the middle of the 20th century, the most important development in the appropriation of *Othello* has been the emergence of a body of theatrical and critical writing by Black and other minority authors from North America, what James Andreas calls "Othello's African-American Progeny" (Andreas: 181). Such authors have shed new light on "the cause," examining miscegenation from the Black point of view. "Black writers have revised the biracial sexual myth that represents the primal impediment to the freedom and equal treatment of black people as human beings. Sexual parity is the ultimate expression of racial equality" (194). Andreas notes that *Othello* has "traumatized African American literature" to the extent that a considerable proportion of works by African American authors such as Richard Wright (*Native Son*), Ralph Ellison (*The Invisible Man*), Chester Himes (*The Primitive*), and Amiri Baraka (*Dutchman* and *The Slave*) are tied together by a preoccupation with *Othello*. More specifically, these works share a historical and geographical recontextualization of the central trope of *Othello*: the biracial sexual coupling of a black male and a white female (181).

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[40] Usually, of course, 'the cause' is taken to refer to 'the cause of justice,' Desdemona's alleged offense; Othello, in this case, is appropriating legalese to construct himself as an agent of justice, not a murderer.

[41] Venice and Cyprus were at the nexus of the Black and White worlds in 1600, both geographically and commercially. Venice was then only miles from the borders of the Ottoman Empire, and Cyprus of course continues to be contested by Christian and Islamic culture to this day. Shakespeare's choice of settings, then, is not coincidental.

[42] For more on the performance history of Othello, see Hankey, Julie (Ed.) (1997). *Plays in Performance: Othello*. London: Bristol Classical Press.

Appropriations of *Othello* by African American male writers, says Jaquelyn McLendon, "revise dominant narratives that interpret the psychology of the black male in white terms" (McLendon: 122). McLendon argues that refigurations of the miscegenation paradigm "told from the perspectives of black men most often reveal themselves in radically oppositional relationship to Shakespeare's perspective" (122). McLendon's strategy of reading the works of Baraka, Ellison, Himes, et. al. against *Othello* is revealing. She demonstrates, for example, certain structural similarities among the texts, such as the objections of the community to the match; the relative position of power enjoyed by the White women in the relationship; the tendency of the protagonists to resort to violence in an attempt to "remedy or reconcile unequal power relations"; and the inevitable ending of such narratives in "the literal or symbolic deaths of both" (122-23). McLendon also shows that African American accounts of miscegenation attempt to demystify the romantic aspect of such relationships by emphasizing and politicizing the sexual aspect (125). Protagonists such as *Dutchman*'s Clay and *The Primitive*'s Jesse are not motivated by love, but use White women, or feel compelled to desire them, in order to stake a claim to White *man*'s power. McLendon finds a resonance with Fanon's argument that "in a society in which the white male is the only recognized frame of humanity," only by possessing what is his may the Black male "become human" (126).

The emergence of a Black perspective on the experience of miscegenation and biracial sexual relationships has changed the way we look at *Othello* – and performers such as Paul Robeson and Ira Aldridge have been as important in this change as the writers mentioned above – so that blackface performances of the title role that were the norm as recently as the 1940s are now very much out of fashion. Andreas quotes Jonathan Miller's defence of his 1981 BBC version, featuring Anthony Hopkins in blackface, as an example of how indefensible such conceptions of *Othello* have become. Miller's argument, that "[w]hen a black actor plays the part, it offsets the play, puts it out of balance. It makes it a play about blackness, which it is not," now seems embarrassing (Andreas: 183). Andreas adds that such performances too, seem embarrassing: "Anyone who has seen Miller's *Othello* or a live production [in blackface] knows the murder scene may well evoke laughter in the audience[43]" (183).

Yet both Andreas and McLendon show that the African American response to *Othello* has not been unproblematic: "what we get in Shakespeare's play and in [these works]" says Andreas, "is, of course, the typical patriarchal perspective on the cultural trauma of miscegenation in the West. Another article representing women's perspectives on this trauma needs to be written (182)." McLendon, too, locates some obvious issues for a feminist critique in the refigurations of *Othello* and of the miscegenation trope by Black male writers: in constructing the woman's body as "the locus where sexism and racism intersect," they re-inscribe sexism even as they deconstruct the "myth of the Black rapist" (McLendon: 128).

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[43] Which, according to Bristol, was exactly the point when the play was performed in its original context (1996).

There have, of course, been feminist responses to *Othello*, both critical and creative. Like Black actors playing Othello, female actors have taken over their roles from men, claiming to represent themselves rather than be represented. Dympna Callaghan, Karen Newman, Jyotsna Singh, and others have all demonstrated that in the Elizabethan context, Desdemona's whiteness was as significant a marker of alterity as Othello's blackness, as both characters were played by White men in stage make-up. Feminist critics of *Othello*, for all their important differences, tend to agree that the White female is essentialized and objectified, the symbolic property that White men are compelled to protect from defilement by the Other. As McLendon says in the article already quoted, "rape and murder become tropes through which these texts show sexual relations between black men and white women as an essential dimension of the power relations between black men and white *men*" (McLendon 127-8, italics in original).

Playwrights such as Paula Vogel and Anne-Marie MacDonald have appropriated *Othello* in order to reclaim Desdemona and the other female characters as active subjects who strive to control their own destinies. Vogel's most potent tactic is to omit the men from the play; like Tom Stoppard in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Vogel relegates Shakespeare's plot and characters to diegetic space in order to foreground the feminine community that is usually offstage in *Othello*. MacDonald, too, in *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning, Juliet)* (1990), constructs Desdemona as an active character who is mis-represented by Shakespeare.

In summary, then, if *Othello* uses miscegenation to confront a White male spectatorship with its fears and anxieties about the integration of the Other into society, Black male and White female writers have appropriated the Black male / White female couple and its symbolic baggage to tell their own experiences of miscegenation[44]. But Sears uses the miscegenation dynamic found in *Othello* in a new way: *Harlem Duet* "talks back" to *Othello* by showing the effects of miscegenation on the Black *female* psyche.

If O'Brien's appropriation consists of deploying the Mad Boy *fabula* in a new dramatic context, Sears's appropriation, similarly, consists of deploying a familiar "miscegenation *fabula*," and relocating it in time and space. She also shifts the focus of the story to a new character: Billie, Othello's Black first wife. Billie's name is short for "Sybil" (which Billie hates), from the lines in *Othello* about the famous handkerchief that Othello gives to Desdemona: "A sibyl … In her prophetic fury sewed the work" (3.4.72-4)[45]. Although the narrative shifts between parallel stories in 1860, 1928, and contemporary Harlem, the conflict at the centre of each is the same: Othello is leaving his wife for a White woman. The story is most fully developed in the present day plot, which features supporting characters such as Billie's landlord, Magi; her sister, Amah; and her father, Canada. Other important offstage characters include Billie's brother Andrew and niece Jenny; and Chris Yago, who, like Othello and Mona, is on the faculty of the English Department at Columbia University. The parallel plots, in which the actors playing Billie and Othello play themselves in different historical circumstances, are less developed and serve mainly to lend historical breadth and aesthetic depth to the play. In all three plotlines, Mona is absent except for her voice, "brief glimpses of a bare arm, and a waft of light brown hair" (47).

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[44] There is also a large body of writing, both fictional and critical, on the historically far more common experience of sexual relationships between White males and Black females, often violently imposed by the former upon the latter (Andreas: 181).

[45] Othello also calls her 'Egyptian,' making her the only African woman mentioned in Shakespeare's play.

The three stories are linked by contiguities of plot, characters, and dramatic space: all three are set in Harlem, at the present-day corner of Malcolm X. and Martin Luther King boulevards. The importance of this geographical referent to *Harlem Duet*'s dramatic space is immediately manifested in Scene 1, when Amah exclaims, "Magi, look at you, out on the terrace, watching the summer blossoms on the corner of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King boulevards" (24-25). The tripartite storyline is also bound together, and to Shakespeare's *Othello*, by the strawberry-embroidered handkerchief that was given to Othello's father by his mother, and then passed on to Othello, who gave it to his wife. The published version of the play includes Othello's description of the handkerchief (excerpted from 3.4.57-74), and it is an important symbol in all three stories in *Harlem Duet*, endowed as it is with both magical and symbolic properties.

At its core, *Harlem Duet* shows Billie's spiral into self-doubt, depression, and rage in the wake of her separation from her husband. Othello, a former Black activist and now a professor of English, has softened his politics in favour of a more liberal attitude. When Othello deserts his wife and moves in with a White co-worker, which is said to happen two months before the play's story begins, Billie is deeply traumatized, an abjection aggravated by her resentment of White (and male) privilege. When Othello comes to pick up his remaining possessions, they end up sleeping together, but Billie's hopes for a reconciliation are crushed when Mona returns, prompting Othello's abrupt exit. Billie's sanity begins to deteriorate shortly thereafter, but before her collapse and subsequent institutionalization, she resorts to the "Egyptian Alchemy" of her textual ancestor (the sybil), putting a curse on the handkerchief that she intends to return to Othello (75). Othello's impending doom – foreshadowed to the *Othello*-savvy audience when Othello announces that he will be "heading the department's courses in Cyprus next summer," even though everyone had expected Othello and Mona's (White) colleague, Chris Yago, to get the position (53) – is apparently sealed when he exits with the handkerchief late in the play, never to reappear.

The handkerchief, which links the three stories to each other and to *Othello*, has a special significance to each character and to the audience. In *Othello*, it is invested with great significance to Othello as a remembrance of his mother – perhaps the only item that ties him to his lost heritage. But in *Harlem Duet*, we discover that Othello has given his mother's handkerchief to Billie: "When she died she gave it me, insisting that when I found… chose… chose a wife… that I give it to her… to you heart" (35). Our knowledge, as reader/spectators, that Othello will later take back what he calls the "antique token of our ancient love" (35) and give it to another woman, overwrites its significance with a certain irony that undermines Othello's credibility: one wonders whether he uses the handkerchief bit every time he "chooses" a woman. For Billie, on the other hand, the handkerchief signifies a racial and connubial bond between them that is poisoned by his betrayal, and she responds to the figural contamination of the bond by literally poisoning the symbol of it[46].

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[46] There is much more to be said about the handkerchief, but space does not permit an in-depth investigation here. The handkerchief has always been a focal point of criticisms of the play, since Othello's reaction to its loss has struck many viewers as well beyond the limits of suspended disbelief. Few have expressed this objection more trenchantly than Thomas Rymer, in 1693: 'Had it been Desdemona's garter, the sagacious Moor might have smelt a rat; but the handkerchief is so remote a trifle, no Booby on this side of Mauritania could make any consequence of it' (qtd. in Hankey 1987: 28). This may be read as evidence for Bristol's argument that the play was not intended to be a tragedy, but the effect of the controversy has been to make the handkerchief one of the most recognizable symbols of the play.

Othello's credibility is further damaged, and our condemnation of Billie's actions somewhat mitigated, by our discovery of the extent to which he has disappointed her. Billie is crippled both emotionally and economically by Othello's desertion, it turns out: she has used her portion of her mother's life insurance to pay Othello's way through school, only to have him balk at his obligation to reciprocate now that it is her turn to go to school. Just as Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* suggests that for every woman who succeeds in the patriarchal world, many more must resign themselves to poverty and disenfranchisement, *Harlem Duet* shows that for a Black male to enjoy the benefits of White society, a Black female must pay the price. In shifting the focus of the drama onto the Black community, *Harlem Duet* exposes the emotional and economic hardships that Black women have suffered as a result of miscegenation.

Miscegenation as Trope

Harlem Duet is linked to *Othello*, and to other responses to *Othello*, through the trope of miscegenation and the use of miscegenation *as* a trope: it is not the union of a Black man and a White woman, in and of itself, that wreaks havoc in these plays, but what this union signifies at the symbolic level. As a trope, miscegenation signifies the construction and transgression of binary paradigms: Self/Other, Black/White, and so on, and its efficacy as such is based in antithetical contrasts of literal and figural binary pairs (light/dark, male/female, present/absent, etc.). The more powerful and numerous the binary contrasts involved, the more potent the transgressive metaphor. The example of *Othello* is one of the most evocative contrasts imaginable: Black / old / male / Moor meets White / young /

female / Christian[47].

In *Othello*, Shakespeare uses miscegenation as a trope, amplified by the contrasting qualities mentioned above, to confront his audience with the possibility of symbolic and literal integration of the Other into European society. Signifying both the literal phenomenon of interracial marriage, and the symbolic transgression and penetration of the boundaries separating (White, European, Christian) Self and (Black, "Oriental," Moorish) Other, it is miscegenation, not Othello's Otherness in and of itself, that prompts the tragic action of the play. In the hierarchical society of Venice, where power and status are fixed by visible markers such as age, gender, and skin colour, Iago is able to exploit fear and anxiety about how the transgression of these barriers might threaten the established and "natural" order of things: "you'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews neigh to you, you'll have coursers for cousins and jennets for germans!" (1.1.109-12). Miscegenation represents not just mixed marriage, then, but the penetrative transgression (symbolic, sexual, and literal) of Otherness into the territory of the Self, and its terrifying consequences, not least of which is the loss of the (visible) boundary between the two.

While the Duke's decision to uphold Othello and Desdemona's marriage confirms that Othello is, despite his Otherness, a valued citizen of Venice (as long as the Turks threaten Venetian trade routes, at least), Brabantio is a respected Venetian, too, and his anxieties about the consequences of miscegenation are shared by the public: "if such actions may have passage free, / Bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be" (1.2.98-99). Even Othello has internalized these anxieties. Arguing that Blackness functions as a negative signifier in *Othello*, Elliott Butler-Evans points out that in the scene where Iago turns Othello against Desdemona, it is Othello who introduces the idea that her attraction to him is not "natural":

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[47] Such stark contrasts – the Grotesque – which permeate the language and imagery of *Othello*, were what made the play attractive to Romantics all over Europe at the same time as it was falling out of favour in England. Memorable lines from *Othello* often feature the convergence of antithetical elements: 'Villain, be sure thou prove my **love** a **whore**' (3.3.375); 'an old **black ram** / Is tupping your **white ewe**'(1.1.90-91; 'If she be **black**, and thereto have a wit, / She'll find a **white** that shall her **blackness fit**' (2.2.134-35).

> OTHELLO: I do not think but Desdemona's honest.
> IAGO: Long live she so; and long live you to think so.
> OTHELLO: And yet, how nature erring from itself –
> IAGO: Ay, there's the point: as, to be bold with you,
> Not to affect many proposed matches
> Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
> Whereto, we see, in all things nature tends –
> Foh! One may smell in such a will most rank
> Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural. (3.3.229-37)

Othello thereby legitimizes "racial objections against himself," argues Butler-Evans, and does so again in other passages, such as, "Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage is now begrim'd and black / As mine own face" (3.3.389-92) (Butler-Evans: 148).

Othello's association of his own skin colour with grime and other negative traits shows that he has internalized his own Otherness, a condition reinforced numerous times in the play's imagery, but most powerfully by the setting: as the only Black person in the play, his alterity is glaringly obvious to the spectator – but only if we assume that the spectatorship is predominantly White, as indeed it has been throughout *Othello*'s performance history. Even if we ignore the association of blackness with negative traits in the language of *Othello*, there can be little doubt that, as a play in which the central issue is miscegenation and all but one character is White, it assumes a homogenous White spectatorship and embodies Otherness in the sole Black character. This presents a problem for Black writers like Sears, whose very object is to claim the Self/Subject position for themselves and their audience. The deployment of the miscegenation trope, therefore, is Sears's first step in the appropriation of *Othello*, just as the deployment of the Mad Boy *fabula* is O'Brien's; the subsequent, and critical step, for Sears, is the manipulation of dramatic space.

Appropriation and Relocation: Dramatic Space

The appropriation and inversion of the miscegenation trope in *Harlem Duet* begins with the variation of dramatic space. Sears recontextualizes the *Othello* story geographically and temporally, so that it is situated in places and times recognizable to its audiences as signifying certain positions in the field of racial convergence and conflict. Like *Othello*, *Harlem Duet* is located geographically at a major intercultural nexus, but Sears's Harlem is not, like Shakespeare's Venice and Cyprus, a point where the Christian European self confronts the Islamic foreign Other. The junction of cultures suggested here is not that of Black and White but of two divergent Black Americas: those represented by the physical junction of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Boulevards. Making Othello a native of his community instead of an alien, is critically important to Sears's re-vision of miscegenation, because Sears's Othello cannot be seen as a victim of the exclusionary privilege of a White society. As Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier point out, Othello in

Harlem Duet must deal with the consequences of *not* being excluded from the community, “where ‘community’ becomes a highly charged code word for white culture as an arbitrary index against which one is (problematically) measured for inclusion or exclusion” (286a). Sears’s Othello is understood from the perspective of a Black community, “a fundamental shift in focus from the Shakespeare original” (286b).

The relocation of Othello in time and space “gives Othello a context: he comes from somewhere, has a country, has a world view” (Sanders, 557). He can no longer be considered merely a cipher for a general, symbolic Other. And in each era, he not only comes from somewhere, but has abandoned it in order to enjoy the benefits of inclusion in White culture: “his choice of whiteness is not singular, and is always dangerous” (558). *Harlem Duet*’s real subject, in fact, is not Othello at all, but the community he has left behind him and the social, emotional, and material effects of his so-called upward social mobility upon that community. The manipulation of dramatic space, then, is connected to an equally important shift in focus to new characters.

Presence and Absence

Approaching Sears’s dramaturgy from a semiotic perspective yields some valuable insights. In “Space and Reference in Drama,” Michael Issacharoff notes that, while one may remove many elements from a play, such as movement or dialogue, “the element that must remain constant and be retained in any text written for theatrical performance is, of course, space. A play when enacted must take place somewhere” (Issacharoff: 211). Issacharoff refers not to the obvious architectural structure of the playhouse, but to the dramatic space, the imaginary semiotic system invoked by a particular play. The distinction between dramatic space and the physical space of the stage, the set, etc., is important, because while the latter are exclusively visible, the former is not: dramatic space includes both onstage (mimetic) and offstage (diegetic) referents (215). Mimetic space, being visible (or audible) to the audience, is transmitted directly to them, whereas diegetic space "is *described*, that is, referred to by the characters," and is therefore communicated verbally, not visually (215). Issacharoff later proposes that, generally speaking, mimetic and diegetic space are complementary in a play, or even in an entire genre, so that the more mimetic space is fixed, the more important diegetic space becomes. For example, in 17th century French tragedy, where dramatic conventions demand unity of place and banish certain action from representation, diegetic space assumes great importance – most of the action takes place offstage; in Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*, similarly, great emphasis is placed on the unseen formal garden even though the entire play takes place in a single room in the Croom manor. The tension between presence and absence, mimetic and diegetic reference is an important part of the dramaturgy of *Harlem Duet* as well.

The mimetic spaces of *Harlem Duet* are "the steps of a blacksmith's forge" in 1860, "a tiny dressing room in Harlem" in 1928, and, most important, Billie's apartment at the corner of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Boulevards, all in Harlem[48]. Billie's apartment at the corner of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Boulevards is by far the dominant scenic element; she never leaves it until the final scene, after being hospitalized. The mimetic space being thus restricted to very specific locations (forge, dressing room, apartment), diegetic space and referents play a relatively important role, and Sears skilfully emphasizes their symbolic presence by making their physical absence verbally explicit. These diegetic referents include both characters and locations, and they acquire both positive and negative significances.

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[48] The precise location and time of year are made explicit in Amah's rather awkwardly expository first line: 'Magi, look at you, out on the terrace, watching the summer blossoms on the corner of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Boulevards' (25).

Sears's first use of diegetic space is in establishing the mimetic space as the symbolic centre of African American culture in the prologue (set in 1928) – "Harlem's the place to be now. Everyone who's anyone is coming here now" (21) – and reinforces the connection between the mimetic space and Black community many times. Fischlin and Fortier note that both verbal and non-verbal sign systems in the play place "black experience at the heart of the play's visual and literary representations":

> [A]ll the characters are black, … the setting of the play is in the symbolic heart (Harlem) of American black culture, and the play, in its non-Shakespearian cultural references (the soundscapes that precede many of the scene changes involve recordings of prominent black figures including Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Langston Hughes, Marcus Garvey, Paul Robeson, Louis Farrakahn, Jesse Jackson, Christopher Darden, and Anita Hill), is explicit in the way in which it constructs itself as a nexus for different forms of black voice. (286b)

If the voices in the soundscape establish the stage as a cultural/political nexus for Black voice, the characters establish the space as the centre of a personal experience of African America, particularly Billie and Othello:

> OTHELLO: I never thought I'd Miss Harlem.

(Pause.)

BILLIE: You still think it's a reservation?

OTHELLO: Homeland/reservation.

BILLIE: A sea of Black faces.

OTHELLO: Africatown, USA.

(Pause.)

BILLIE: When we lived in the Village, sometimes I'd I'd be on the subway and I'd miss my stop … And I'd just walk. I love seeing all these brown faces.

OTHELLO: Yeh…

BILLIE: Since they knocked down the old projects, I can see the Schomberg Museum from here. You still can't make out Harlem Hospital. I love that I can see the Apollo from our – from my balcony. (56-7)

This passage fulfills several functions: enriches the dramatic space by invoking the diegetic space of Harlem; the landmarks mentioned – a museum of African American history, the hospital where White staff resigned to protest the hiring of Black doctors and nurses, and the theatre where countless Black artists began their careers – all establish Harlem as the centre of African American culture and achievement (the "projects," on the other hand are now a thing of the past); it links the mimetic space of the apartment to the diegetic Harlem; and it locates both at the centre of African American experience. And given that their reminiscence brings about a shift in tone, ending a heated argument and leading to a romantic and sexual reconciliation – albeit brief – the idea of Harlem and the apartment as "Africatown, USA" acquires positive and restorative connotations, as well.

The establishment of the play's Harlem as the centre of Black community is not, however, unproblematic, as Othello's ambivalence indicates: is Harlem a reservation or a homeland? Magi, too, recognizes that the construction of Harlem as the centre of an African American universe is potentially oppressive; what Othello calls Africatown, USA, she calls "the Soweto of America" (25). Throughout the play, Harlem is represented ambiguously and problematically; it is cast as both a safe haven and stronghold of Black identity, and as a kind of concentration camp that isolates Black America from the White world. The intersection of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King is also, of course, a symbolic intersection in the play, representing two divergent political projects: will the future of Black America turn out to be conceived in King's "dream" of equality and amalgamation or in Malcolm X's separatist nationalism? Billie's conception of Harlem as the heart of the Black world is troubled, too, by the binarism of the Black vs. White paradigm. In creating a world defined by Blackness, she resorts to the same logic of hegemonic White culture: her Black community is defined by Whiteness, or rather not-Whiteness, and like White racists she is troubled by the presence of the monstrous Other on the margins of her world, always encroaching upon its borders and yet necessary to make those borders visible. The threat of contamination is most strongly present-ed by the diegetic reference to what Magi calls "Harlumbia": "those 10 square blocks of Whitedom, owned by Columbia University, set smack dab in the middle of Harlem" (67). Here in the centre of Billie's African American haven is a powerful symbol of the White culture that has excluded her and consumed her husband.

Like other Shakespeare appropriators, such as Stoppard and Vogel, Sears uses diegetic space to consign the parent text to the offstage margins of the play, where we are always dimly aware of it, while seizing mimetic space and "centre stage" for her own characters and their concerns. Sears's skilful use of diegetic spaces dramatically enriches the depth and breadth of the play, always making the audience aware that the very specific, localized events enacted on the playing space have global, historical ramifications.

Just as a shift in historical and geographical context is a critical part of confronting negotiating cultural/racial/sexual difference in Shakespeare, the shift in focus to minor or new characters, while simultaneously marginalizing the central tragic figure, is another. In *Harlem Duet*, as in such appropriations as Vogel's *Desdemona*, MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning, Juliet)*, and *Lear's Daughters* (1987), the shift in focus from Shakespearean heroes and heroines to new characters (or minor characters who have been "fleshed out," like Vogel's Emilia and Bianca) is balanced by the consignment of Shakespeare's characters to diegetic space, where they nevertheless continue to play important roles. Most notable among these in *Harlem Duet* are Mona ("Miss Dessy" in 1860) and Chris Yago, who strengthen the connection between *Harlem Duet* and *Othello*. As absent characters, they also serve the important function of calling attention to the absence of Whiteness from the mimetic space, a tactic I discuss in depth below. There are also important Black diegetic characters, especially Billie's brother Andrew (Amah's husband) and niece, Jenny. From Amah's stories of Amah and Jenny's weekly outings, we learn that Billie is actually Canadian, a descendant of slaves who fled to Nova Scotia on the Underground Railroad. Jenny also represents the hopes and dreams of the adult characters for the future of Black America, and Billie's thwarted dream of creating "the perfect Black family":

> BILLIE: Remember when we moved in? The day Nelson and Winnie came to Harlem, remember? Winnie and Nelson – our welcoming committee … And me and you and Othe and Drew went down to hear them speak … And you asked me to hold baby Jenny while you went to the restroom, when this man came up to us and took out picture. Asked to take our picture. Jenny in my arms. Othello beside me. "The perfect Black family." That's what he called us. "The perfect Black family." (42-3)

Billie's friend and landlady, Magi, introduces us to another set of diegetic characters, all Black men. Magi's frustrations about her lifelong search for an eligible bachelor in her community are comically evoked in her taxonomy of the varieties of Black men. Through her, we are introduced to "Wedded Wendel," who turns out to be married ("He believes that the nuclear family is the basis for a healthy society. That's why he's married. He keeps his own personal nuclear family at home in the event that he might want to spend some time with it" (27).); "Macho Mack," who watches baseball during their "romantic dinner" (64); "Booker T. Uppermiddleclass III," who lives in the suburbs, refers to Blacks as "them" and gets invited to the White House by George Bush "to discuss the 'Negro Problem'" (66); and "Brother Hakim," the radical who "can be spotted at any rally where the subject is prefaced by the words 'Third World,'" and has fathered seven children but never married (101). In contrast to these types, and to

Othello, whom she describes as a White mind in a Black body (67), there is True Drew, Billie's brother, who maintains what Magi concedes is an unrealistic balance of maturity, masculinity, political awareness, and commitment to his family: he stays up late comforting his sister, walks in the Million Man March, cooks vegan dinners, and still has time to take his daughter to her African dance lessons. Magi's scornful appraisal of African American males is part of Sears's establishment of a space that privileges not only Black experience, but specifically the Black woman's experience. Her satirical reduction of Black men to a series of types, reminiscent of the blazon tradition of male Renaissance poets, subjects men to a playful critique that they, like the Elizabethan women who could not represent their own experience on stage, are powerless to answer.

Ultimately, the most powerful diegetic referents are those that Sears makes most powerfully absent – references to the White culture that, in the form of Mona, has invaded Billie's fantasy of a pure, uncorrupted Black community, and with it a Black Self. By taking such pains to emphasize the absence of White characters from the space of the play, Sears is in fact giving Whiteness a strong symbolic presence. The most obvious example of this, of course, is the conspicuous absence of White characters from the mimetic space, an absence foregrounded by the frequent references to White characters and White society, especially insofar as they encroach on Billie's space. The convention of banishing Whiteness from mimetic space is waived only once, so to speak, and then all we see of Mona is her arm and "a waft of light brown hair" (47), which actually emphasizes the exclusion of Whites from the stage. The consequence of this physical absence, however, is an increased diegetic presence of the White woman, Mona, and of the White world in general. While they are exiled from the stage, there are abundant references to White people and the White world outside Billie's increasingly constricted world (Magi tells us that "her trips out into the real world are brief" (30). Mona's importance as a diegetic character, for example, can hardly be overstated; for, although none of the characters in the play explicitly blames her for Othello's decision to abandon Billie, the miscegenation trope is all the more powerful because the White woman is constructed as so dangerous and Othered as to be denied representation. This is emphasized in the scene directly after Othello and Billie sleep together. When Mona returns (we hear her on the apartment's intercom), her voice – and subsequently her *silence* – have a marked effect on Othello:

> MONA: *(Through intercom.)* It's Mona. Could I have a word with Othello.
>
> OTHELLO: *(Overlapping.)* Shit!
>
> BILLIE: One second please.
>
> *(He rushes to the intercom, while attempting to put his clothes back on. BILLIE tries to hold back her laughter. Her laughter begins to infect OTHELLO. He puts a finger over his mouth indicating to BILLIE to be quiet.)*
>
> OTHELLO: Hey Mone… Mone, I'm not done yet. There's more here than I imagined. Why don't I call you when I'm done.
>
> *(MONA does not respond. OTHELLO's demeanour changes.)*
>
> OTHELLO: Mona? Mona? I'm coming, OK? I'll be right… Just wait there for a second, OK? OK? (61)

Othello's reaction to Mona's return invests her with more status than any of the onstage characters in the play, and the soundscape at the top of the scene ("*Malcolm X speaks about the need for Blacks to turn their gaze away from Whiteness so that they can see each other with new eyes*" (60)) endows the episode with a sharp irony.

Aside from Mona and Chris Yago, there are numerous references to Whites and the White community in general: in the first scene alone we see Magi "*reading a magazine with a large picture of a blonde woman on the cover*" (24), and Magi and Amah talk about the bureaucracy that prevents Amah from getting a cosmetician's certificate until she finishes a "two year course on how to do White people's hair and make-up" (26). In addition to these offhand references to the White world that Billie has isolated herself from, Othello and Billie's arguments are thoroughly overdetermined by the discourse of racial difference. The conspicuous absence of White characters from mimetic space, combined with Billie's tendency to turn every conversation to the topic of racial injustice, makes diegetic references to Whiteness and White culture all the more powerful. Eventually it becomes clear that Billie, in her attempt to create a wholly Black space for herself, has ironically succumbed to the same binary logic that governs White culture. She accuses Othello of defining his life by White standards – "White people are always the line for you, aren't they? The rule… the margin… the variable of control" (55, ellipses in original) – when in fact both of them have defined themselves by the imaginary line separating White and Black.

Dramatic Spaces in Time

Sears's inversion of the miscegenation trope, once established through the manipulation of dramatic space, is reiterated in three distinct times, each reflecting a prominent era in

African American history: on the eve of Emancipation and Civil War in 1860, and at the height of the Harlem Renaissance – and the peak of the blackface minstrel performance phenomenon – in 1928. In the 1860 plot, Billie and Othello (Her and Him) are labourers on the estate of "Miss Dessy." They plan an escape to Canada, where Him will be a blacksmith and they will raise "four boys and four girls" in a "big white house" on an "emerald hill" (35), but when Her comes to meet Him on the eve of their escape – in a scene inserted directly after Othello's hasty exit from Billie's apartment – he has changed his mind. He tries to explain that he feels guilty leaving Miss Dessy, since she needs him now with her father "going to war," but even after Her confronts him about his feelings, he is evasive: "I love you. It's just… She needs me. She respects me. Looks up to me, even. I love you. It's just that with her I feel like… a man. I want… I need to do for her…" (63). As in the main storyline, Othello finds affirmation of his manhood in the White woman's gaze, but also his doom: the next time we see this Othello, he has been hanged, the inevitable end, it is implied, of miscegenated relationships in antebellum America[49].

In the 1928 scenes, Othello (He) is an actor in minstrel shows, and this time He abandons Billie (She) for Mona, a director who offers him the chance to act Shakespeare. This version of the story is presented chronologically out of order; in fact, the scene in which He abandons She forms the prologue of the play, establishing a convention of inserting the sub-plot scenes so as to augment or contrast with contiguous scenes in the central plot. The scene that opens the play is visually and verbally ironic: the lights come up on He with his face lathered with white shaving cream, which he quickly shaves off

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[49] Except, of course, in cases where the man was White and the woman a Black slave – a much more historically common experience of miscegenation, as Andreas acknowledges (181).

(ironically, as part of his preparation for "blackening up"), while she utters the first line of the play: "We keep doing this, don't we?" (21).

Like the central plot, the historical subplots make use of diegetic space in ways that add depth to the core storyline. In the 1860 plot Sears uses diegetic referents to establish the characters in the context of a larger world[50]. They talk about Saartjie Baartman's genitals being put on display in France (a fate that has also befallen their friend Cleotis, whose genitals are on display in a mason jar at the local hardware store), and about the Civil war brewing in the south, and about ships returning to Africa, but most importantly, in light of the play's Canadian spectatorship, they establish Canada as a symbol of freedom for Black slaves[51]. In addition, in passages that are later repeated by Billie and Othello in their present-day incarnations, they enact a familiar romantic game in which Him maps out Her body as American territory in an anachronistic allusion to Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' speech:

> *(HIM kisses inside the crook of HER's arm.)*
>
> HER: Oh-oh. You're prospecting again.
>
> HIM: I'm exploring the heightening Allegenies of Pennsylvania.
>
> *(HIM kisses HER.)*
>
> The curvaceous slopes of California.
>
> *(HIM kisses HER.)*

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[50] This reiteration proves problematic with respect to the use of time and space, for while Sears evokes powerful images of slavery (among other things, we see Him forging shackles (62), and hear him talk about how, in Canada, people will pay him for his work (35)), New York was a free state. It is perhaps because of this inconsistency that the spatial referents in this sub-plot do not include Harlem (this is only mentioned in stage directions), though they invoke a larger, global space than the other, Harlem-specific scenes.

[51] Saartjie Baartman, the 'Hottentot Venus, ' was a Khoi Khoi woman brought back to Europe from South Africa in 1810 and put on display in front of Whites who, as Her says, paid to see 'how big her butt was, and when she died, how big her pussy was' (34). After her death in 1815, her genitalia and brain were removed, and remained on display well into the 20th century.

The red hills of Georgia, the mighty mountains of New York.

(HIM kisses HER again.)

I'm staking my claim.

HER: I don't come cheap, you know.

HIM: I know. I'm offering much more than money can buy. (36)[52]

Him's metaphorical mapping of Her's body as the American landscape is an inversion of the well-known Renaissance colonialist discourse, in which White colonists represented the New World as "virgin territory," using the female body as a metaphor for colonized land (See Loomba 1996: 166). By appropriating the colonialist metaphor, Sears stakes a claim to the New World for the African American. Challenging the metaphor of the American landscape as a passive, virginal territory to be possessed and cultivated by White European patriarchy, she envisions America as a Black woman who asserts her right to evaluate the claim staked by Him.

The 1928 scenes fashion an entirely different, but equally important diegetic space in the play. Apart from evoking the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s, the scenes are set in a "tiny dressing room" at the theatre – the Apollo, perhaps? – where He performs in minstrel shows, and the diegetic space is primarily that of the theatre. In this articulation of the story, Othello's desire for Mona – now a theatre director who gives him the chance to play Shakespeare – is tied to again to her gaze: "Mona sees my gift," he says (99). Yet in this case, it is not only Mona's gaze but also the collective gaze of the theatre that Othello craves, and the chance to be legitimized performing Shakespeare, like his hero Ira Aldridge: "I'll not die in black-face to pay the rent. I am of Ira Aldridge stock. I am a classical man. I long to play the Scottish king. The prince of Denmark" (99). By specifying the mimetic space as offstage or backstage, Sears creates an implied diegetic *onstage* space, directing the audience's gaze simultaneously to the theatricality of the play, to the problematic roles of theatre and Shakespeare in Black culture, and to the performance of Race. As a minstrel actor, Othello makes a living representing his own Otherness, and his internalization of that Otherness is such that his greatest dream is to perform in the world of the White, "legitimate" theatre, and to perform White roles. Ironically, the role Mona offers him is not the prince of Denmark, but the prince of Tyre, Pericles, whose experience of diasporic wandering and exile is shared by the various Othellos. In what is perhaps the most striking use of a sub-plot scene to amplify or comment on one of the main plot scenes, immediately after Othello leaves Billie's world for the last time, he becomes Othello in 1928 again, "blackening up" for a minstrel performance while reciting Othello's speeches to the Venetian senate, in which he tells how he and Desdemona courted each other. In these lines, "rehearsed" by a (Black actor playing a) Black actor putting on blackface to perform in front of a diegetic White audience, Othello's need for the White female gaze is made apparent once more: she is attracted to his exotic-ness (which she experiences in his stories), and he needs her respect to feel human: "… My story being done, / She gave me for my pains a world of sighs. / She wished she had not heard it, yet she wished / That heaven had made her such a man" (113). Having left Sears's world, Othello symbolically returns to Shakespeare's: we never see him again.

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[52] Thanks to Dr. James Marino for pointing out the reference to Martin Luther King, Jr. For the text of King's speech, see http://web66.coled.umn.edu/new/MLK/MLK.html.

Constructing the (Black) Subject/Spectator

Whether it was initially received as a tragedy or, as Bristol contends, a farce, Shakespeare's *Othello* asked its audience to contemplate the possibility of not excluding the Other from society (Fischlin and Fortier, 286a). The Other, in this case, is conceived as a Moor in Venetian society, and his Otherness was made explicit both visibly (by his being portrayed by a White man in black makeup) and verbally (by dialogue referring to him as black, Moorish, old, savage, etc.). But Desdemona, too, as Callaghan shows, was played by a White man, and like Othello she was distinguished as an Other by this fact and by makeup (white face, red lips, etc.). Since all non-White, non-male characters were represented as Other (and "Othered" by the very mechanisms of representation), the audience's point of view was constructed as exclusively White and male. In *Harlem Duet*, of course, Sears's goal is to construct a Black, female subject and address a Black community in her audiences. The conspicuous absence of White characters from the mimetic space, already discussed, is essential to Sears's construction of a Black spectatorship. This alone "forces the audience, regardless of who they are, into viewing the play from the perspective of black audiences" (Sanders: 558). *Harlem Duet* challenges the "hegemonic whiteness" that Susan Bennett says is the "default position for the Western audience" (Bennett 1995: 19). The play "places issues of race at the centre of a theatrical practice that exorcizes the 'whiteness' of theatrical representation generally," exposing the assumed whiteness of Western theatre practice (Fischlin and Fortier: 285b). Sears's frustration with the invisibility of Black culture in Canada informs her decision to set the play at the geographical centre of African-American culture, Harlem, yet mark its Canadian-ness throughout in references to Billie's heritage, to Canada as a haven for escaped slaves, and, more light-heartedly, to Canadian football and dietary differences. In an interview with Ric Knowles, she comments on her experience as a Black woman in Canadian theatre, an experience that informs much of *Harlem Duet*: "Before *Harlem Duet*, Canadian Stage had never produced a work by an author of … African descent. And the problem with Canadian Stage is that it's called Canadian Stage, and it represents Canada, and I'm thinking, 'I'm Canadian, so it must represent me'" (Knowles 1998: 30). Sears's challenge to the "default whiteness" of the spectator, then, stems not so much from a desire to confront the assumptions of the White spectator as from a desire to address her own needs, as a Black spectator, for theatre that represents Black experience:

> I have a dream. A dream that one day in the city where I live, at any given time of year, I will be able to find a play that is filled with people who look like me, telling stories about me, my family, my friends, my community. For most people of European descent, this is a privilege they take for granted. (14)

The "default whiteness" of the spectator, and his or her privilege to take it for granted, is broken in the first few lines, when She says "Harlem's the place to be now. Everyone who's anyone is coming here now. It's our time. It's our place" (21). In this context, She refers specifically to a Black subjectivity, and the use of the general terms "everyone who's anyone" and "our place," instead of the specific "everyone Black," banishes the White subject, who usually assumes that "everyone" refers to him or her. The play thus "provides an experience of how those 'other' in a culture might feel dislocated by the dominant culture, and wish themselves to dislocate and challenge its premises" (Sanders: 558).

The distinction of White as Other allows Sears to appropriate the miscegenation trope; instead of confronting a White community with the fearful presence of the monstrous Other, she shows a Black community struggling with the same problem. Just as the White culture of Elizabethan London needed the Other in order to fix its own identity, Billie's purist Black identity can only be confirmed by the existence of an opposing Whiteness, which constantly threatens to contaminate her. Although no Whites appear on stage, Billie's preoccupation with Whites becomes more and more apparent as she struggles with Othello's betrayal. Although she tells her niece that "colour's only skin deep" (44), she talks about race in terms that suggest otherwise: "It is a disease. We get infected as children and … and the bacteria … the virus slowly spreads, disabling the entire system" (67, ellipses in original). Like the referent of Othello's "It is the cause, my soul," the "it" to which Billie refers is not clear, but it seems to refer to Whiteness in general, just as Othello's "it" has been interpreted as referring to his own Blackness.

Sears's Othello, too, has problems fixing his identity as he leaves his community behind. The irony of recasting Othello as an English professor at Columbia University – and one who opposes affirmative action – is inescapable, and Sears's dramatic structure works against his attempts to gain our sympathy. While he represents the experience of a Black man who is frustrated by the racism of his colleagues on the one hand, and the resentment of Black women who mistake him for "someone's inattentive father" (71) on the other, his credibility is undercut as each scene sheds new light on the various ways he has abandoned the Black community and his own formerly militant Black nationalist beliefs. When he responds to Billie's accusation that he craves "White respect" by saying, "White respect, Black respect, it's all the same to me … I am a member of the human race," Billie exposes him as a hypocrite:

> Oh, that's a switch. What happened to all that J.A. Rogers stuff you were pushing. Blacks created the world, Blacks are the progenitors of European civilization, gloriana… Constantly trying to prove you're as good, no, better than White people. White people are always the line for you, aren't they? (55)

White people are indeed the line for Othello; in all three versions of his story, "he falls in love with whiteness, craving the gaze of the White woman as affirmation of his manhood" (Sanders: 558). Yet, if he is guilty of abandoning Billie and their shared dream of a Black community, he also has his reasons for it, claiming that "the Black feminist position as I experience it" leaves him "unrecognized as a man," leaving him little choice but to seek his manhood in the gaze of the White woman:

> [Y]ou want to know the truth? I'll tell you the truth. Yes, I prefer White women. They are easier – before and after sex. They wanted me and I wanted them. They weren't filled with hostility about the unequal treatment they were getting at their jobs. We'd make love and I'd fall asleep not having to beware being mistaken for someone's inattentive father. I'd explain that I wasn't interested in a committed relationship right now, and not be confused with every lousy lover, or husband that had ever left them

> lying in a gutter of unresolved emotions. That's the truth. To a Black woman, I represent every Black man that she has ever been with and with whom there was still so much to work out … Look, I'm not a junkie. I don't need more than one lover to prove my manhood … I did not leave you, your mother, or your aunt, with six babies and a whole lotta love. (71)

Billie and Othello's heated duels throughout the play juggle the issues of gender and race, something no other appropriations of *Othello* have been able to do effectively. Billie's experience shows that the process of assimilation of African Americans into the wealth and privilege of dominant culture has been unequal, and Othello's experience offers some suggestions about what would lead him to abandon his Black nationalism – and his wife – to join White society. Othello denies that race has anything to do with it, claiming, "I am not my skin. My skin is not me" (74), but he also unwittingly implicates himself as a willing participant in an inequitable system: "My Mama used to say, you have to be three times as good as a White child to get by, to do well. A piece of that pie is mine. I don't want to change the recipe" (73). Like Marlene, the troubled heroine of *Top Girls*, Othello defines his success in terms of the dominant values that once marginalized him, without seeing that his success will do nothing to ameliorate the marginalization of others. Both Othello and Marlene define themselves as successful because they have risen to the top of the hierarchy, without taking responsibility for the fact that for them to get to the top, several others must stay at the bottom. Othello's entry into White culture, like Marlene's success in the patriarchal world of business, is made possible only by his choice to abandon his own family.

Billie's abjection and feelings of betrayal are amplified both by the fact that Othello has left her for a White woman and by the economic hardships his abandonment imposes upon her. Moving into a new house with Mona leaves Othello "mortgaged up the wazoo," and he reneges on his obligation to pay for Billie's education (an act that does much to erode his credibility with the audience, who knows that Billie put her own education on hold and used her mother's life insurance benefits to pay for his education), and leaves her with the prospect of being forced to move out of her apartment. Billie's despair leads her to seek succour in self-help literature, nicotine, and alchemy. Her anger and anguish is directed not only at Othello, but increasingly at White culture, to an extent that worries Magi and Amah. Billie's obsession finally prompts a lecture from her friend and landlady, Magi:

> Is everything about White people with you? Is every living moment of your life eaten up with thinking about them. Do you know where you are? Do you know who you are anymore? What about right and wrong. Racism is a disease, my friend, and your test just came back positive. (103)

Magi's outburst is well timed, coming as it does late in the play when the spectator is struggling to identify with a sympathetic character. Shortly after this exchange, Billie suffers a mental breakdown, thereby losing both her literal and symbolic claim to the representational space she identifies so deeply with throughout the play. The symbolic power of the space is fixed, however, and Magi remains its inhabitant. Ironically, Magi's claim to the space has been fixed by another instance of miscegenation: the house was left to Magi's great-grandmother, who bore her white employer (the former owner of the house) two children. At the end of the play, our disillusionment with the dis-integrated Black "homeland" represented by Billie, and the equally unattractive mask of liberal integrationism represented by the doomed Othello, is tempered by hope for a budding relationship between Magi and Canada, who have faced their demons – White and otherwise – and reconciled with them. Both Magi and Canada (who has himself dated White women, a point of resentment with Billie) have learned to distinguish White people and White society from the racism and horror represented here by the White Other, and their perspective on life seems to offer the most hope for both interracial harmony and inner peace. At the end of the play, one Harlem duet ends in discord, but another finds harmony, as Canada announces his intent to stay.

The Canadian Spectator

Aside from moving Othello and his community from the margins of the play's community to its centre, the strategy of moving the play from Venice to Harlem has an effect on the way Sears's target audience of Black *Canadians* receive the play. Sears, a Canadian playwright based in Toronto, adopts the familiar Shakespearean tactic of locating her play in a place that is removed from its immediate audience (in place and/or time) yet readily recognizable to it. Just as Shakespeare drew on his audience's conception of Venice and Cyprus, Sears's Toronto audiences must have recognized the significance of Harlem, especially given that Canada is referred to as both a safe haven (for escaped Black slaves) and a person, Billie's father. And while Harlem is a more familiar context to contemporary audiences than Renaissance Venice, Canada's monologue about his first visit to Harlem reminds us that, whether Black or White, Canadians' understanding of "Harlem" is filtered through the lens of White media and representation:

> CANADA: The first time I came to Harlem, I was scared . . . Everything I'd ever learned told me I wasn't safe in this part of town. The newspapers. Television. My friends. My own family. But I'm curious, see. I says, Canada you can't be in New York City and not see Harlem . . . So . . . I put on my "baddest mother in the city" glare. I walk -- head straight. All the time trying to make my stride say, "I'm mean . . . I'm mean. Killed somebody mean." So I'm doing this for 'bout five, ten minutes . . . when I begin to realize . . . No-one is taking any notice of me . . . Not a soul. Then it dawns on me: I'm the same as them. I look just like them. I look like I live in Harlem. Sounds silly now. But I just had to catch myself and laugh out loud. Canada, where did you get these ideas about Harlem from? (79)

This geographic / linguistic double-meaning is an example of how Sears constructs the play with regard to her spectators in order to engage their imaginations in specific ways, a very Shakespearean tactic (as when Italian characters in *Romeo and Juliet* make fun of British habits, etc.). Canada – both the character and the nation that the spectators identify as their own – has been led by media and society to conceive of Harlem as a dangerous place, but when Canada goes there himself, his surprise at not being branded as an outsider leads him (and us) to realize the extent to which he has internalized a

White view of the world.

Conclusion

Othello uses dramatic space to intensify the Otherness of the Black male in the miscegenation trope, making Othello the lone Black man in a White society already troubled by the proximity of the Ottoman Empire. By contrast, *Harlem Duet* creates a space for the female Black experience of miscegenation, by locating Billie and Othello in the heart of Black America, and banishing White characters from the mimetic space altogether. The horror felt by *Othello*'s White audience (represented onstage by Brabantio, Iago, and others), is now turned on the Black spectator, who must similarly recognize the potential for tragedy in defining the self in relation to the Other. No longer conceived or represented merely as the Othered victim of exclusion and racism, the Black subject must confront his or her own potential for racism, and beware constructing their own monstrous Other in the form of Whiteness, as Billie does.

In addition to asking the spectators to reconsider their own world, the appropriation of *Othello* also changes the way we think of the parent text. As Sanders says, the "Othello of *Harlem Duet* is far from heroic; as a result the canonical Othello is greatly diminished" (558). He is given a context, an origin, and a community in which he need not face exclusion, yet he still abandons them to seek affirmation of his masculinity, a masculinity that is problematically defined in relation to the White gaze. "White gaze," for that matter, is ironized in the performance of *Harlem Duet*: in the absence of White characters to identify with, the audience, regardless of who they are, is forced to view the play from the perspective of Black experience (Sanders: 558). The default "maleness" of the audience, too is thrown into doubt, by Sears's privileging of female experience.

The appropriation of *Othello* in *Harlem Duet* shares some characteristics with *Mad Boy Chronicle*, such as the spatial and historical relocation of the *fabula*, but in its specific strategies for negotiating historical, cultural, and sexual difference, it is perhaps more closely linked to other, feminist-oriented Shakespeare appropriations, such as *Desdemona*, *Lear's Daughters*, and *Goodnight Desdemona, (Good Morning Juliet)*. In addition to shifting time and space, these appropriations shift focus onto new or revised characters, while consigning the events and characters of the parent text to the margins, to off-stage space and/or off-stage time – Othello's story begins where Billie's ends. By subjecting the tragic hero to revision in a new context, Sears strips him of his tragic dignity and shows the context of his choices, relating them to the contemporary Black community as a whole. After *Harlem Duet*, the spectator can never look at *Othello* in the same way, or through the same gaze.

Conclusion: Towards a Dramaturgy of Appropriation

The study of Shakespeare appropriation has proven a challenging topic. The major difficulty lies in recognizing the ubiquity of appropriation; that is, recognizing that every time a text is uttered, performed, alluded to, or cited in an argument, it constitutes an appropriative act. From my perspective, this has meant that, dealing with the dramatic appropriation of Shakespeare in works by two Canadian playwrights, I have had to confront a much larger corpus of Shakespeare appropriations, one that always threatens to overwhelm arguments put forth by new appropriators, whether critical, like myself, or creative, like Michael O'Brien and Djanet Sears. Although I have not been able to address all the issues invoked by such a broad subject, I hope I have successfully identified several areas for further study and contributed to the beginnings of what might be called a "theory of the dramaturgy of appropriation." By this I mean a theory of appropriations that applies specifically to dramatic texts, where appropriation is attributable to an authorial agency and a specific receptive context. In this way, perhaps, we can "bracket off" the appropriation of texts for the theatre, Shakespearean or otherwise, from the broader concept of appropriation as it applies to such discursive practices as literary criticism, advertising media, film, daily conversation, and so on.

I have also tried to address Ania Loomba's argument that "only the insistent placing of Shakespeare alongside other texts can help us to think seriously about 'cultural difference,' even 'in' Shakespeare." One way to approach Loomba's challenge, discussed in chapter two, is to foreground Shakespeare's own appropriative activity. We can hold him up to the mirror of his descendants, like O'Brien, and his contemporaries, like Belleforest and Kyd, but also his ancestors, such as Saxo Grammaticus. Tracing a *fabula* through the *sjuzets* of several authors, each located in a specific cultural context, we can learn a great deal about what properly "belongs" to each author and what are the precise ideological ramifications implicit in each appropriation.

Second, by examining the rearticulations of two Shakespearean *fabulas* by two contemporary authors, I have tried to identify some general dramaturgical tactics of appropriation. One of these is the recontextualization of the *fabula* in space and/or in time; this can consist of moving the play forward to make it more contemporary with the author's own social context, as is the case in *Hamlet* and *Harlem Duet*, or backwards, as O'Brien does with *Mad Boy Chronicle*. In either case, it is clear that the author's intent is to situate the play in a place/time with a specific significance to the receptive community he or she is targeting. Another tactic we have seen is the introduction of new characters, which take "centre stage," while the characters and events of the parent text are consigned to the diegetic margins of the action; this strategy is used by Sears and Shakespeare (the latter fleshes out minor characters from Saxo's plot in order to make them into foils to the protagonist), and also by other recent Shakespeare appropriators like Tom Stoppard, Paula Vogel, and Anne-Marie MacDonald. This tactic allows the playwright to signify that the play the audience is watching should be considered in light of the play that they know is going on in diegetic space – and vice versa. Where Sears consigns Shakespeare's plot to offstage space in order to shift focus to her own issues (and foreground their absence in Shakespeare), O'Brien, by contrast, uses the familiar elements of the parent text to construct a deliberately misleading horizon of expectations in the audience, an illusion he subsequently dispels, forcing the audience to look elsewhere for meaning in the play, perhaps even to re-evaluate their expectations of the parent text. O'Brien's appropriation also employs carnivalesque tactics, such as the debasement of sacred, exalted, and official symbols of authority in order to bring them back to a familiar relationship with the audience.

The Challenge of Appropriation

I would like to close by suggesting two directions for further investigation. First, I have discussed appropriation as a challenge to the political and cultural authority of the Shakespeare Myth. But is the extent of this authority such that such plays may still, in the oft-repeated words of Alan Sinfield, "point back towards Shakespeare as the profound and inclusive originator in whose margins we can doodle only parasitic follies" (Sinfield 1995 [1985]: 203)? How can we determine whether an appropriation of Shakespeare resists or subverts his cultural authority, or whether, by its very preoccupation, it simply becomes a spin-off, a subaltern of the Shakespeare Corp(u)s? Is it truly futile, as Audrey Lorde asserts, to use the master's tools to deconstruct the master's house (Lorde 1984: 110)? That both *Mad Boy Chronicle* and *Harlem Duet* have gone on to enjoy good reviews, prestigious awards or nominations, and repeat productions, indicates that both O'Brien and Sears have, in the material sense, overcome Shakespeare's dominance of the theatre. But the influence of the Shakespeare Myth in the field of cultural production, that is, the multiple channels through which it is transmitted to audiences and readers – education, media, popular culture, etc. – is ultimately much more powerful, and much less understood, than the influence of his plays in theatres. By placing Shakespeare at the centre of their texts, is it possible that, instead of challenging his dominance, they have re-asserted his authority and, therefore, finally submitted to him? *Calgary Herald* critic Martin Morrow's review of *Mad Boy Chronicle* may be taken as an illustration of this problem: an overwhelmingly positive review that declares the play one of the best in the history of ATP's festival of new Canadian works, it nevertheless begins, "Imagine Hamlet …" and goes on to mention or allude to Shakespeare and *Hamlet* no less than 16 times (*Mad Boy Chronicle*, 152). Inserting these playwrights into Jauss's category of those who try to appropriate, imitate, outdo, or refute presents problems insofar as it implies subordination to a master text, as if these authors were taking their places as links in the chain of the Shakespeare "literary event." A methodological perspective that privileges the receptive apparatus and the field of cultural production might be a helpful step in determining the significance of "Shakespeare" in the reader/spectator's world-view, and the nature of the interaction between this idea of Shakespeare and the one embodied by appropriations.

Second, while I have isolated one kind of appropriation from several others for this discussion, the re-writing of Shakespeare needs to be understood in relation to the re-vising, or re-visualizing, that is done by stage and especially film artists who deal in the Shakespeare trade. Commenting on her own experience of appropriating Ibsen's *Lady form the Sea*, Susan Sontag points out that the appropriation and adaptation of Shakespeare (and other "classics"), once a matter of re-writing, is increasingly a matter of *mise-en-scène*: "with the rise of theatre dominated by author-directors, it is the director who, without actually rewriting (though often abridging) the text of a famous play, proposes fundamental changes in the story through a novel inflection of the characters or an abstract or radically transposed setting – all this superimposed upon the 'same' text"

(Sontag 1999: 89). This kind of appropriation is much more difficult to quantify in the absence of a stable, printed text, and further complicated in cases where the author-director's intervention is obscured or mediated by a claim to *restore* a stable master text (and therefore, a stable Shakespeare) rather than challenge it, as in the case of Branagh's film of *Henry V* (1990) (see Breight). The "appropriativity" of directing, montage, and *mise-en-scène* is vital to a fuller understanding of appropriation, Shakespearean and otherwise, especially in light of the overwhelming influence of the film industry, which has shown increasing interest in Shakespeare in the last 15 years.

Finally, at the end of his notes to *Mad Boy Chronicle*, Michael O'Brien writes, "Only in Canada could such a play get writ." The present project began with the idea of addressing this statement. Is O'Brien correct? And if so, what, exactly, is "Canadian" about Canadian Shakespeare appropriation? Ultimately, I backed away from this line of questioning, feeling the need to establish what appropriation means in dramatic terms, before I could ascertain what was Canadian about it. Shakespeare appropriation clearly attracts interest in Canada, as indicated by the plays of O'Brien, Sears, Anne-Marie MacDonald, Ken Gass (*Cluadius*, 1993), Norman Chaurette (*The Queens*, 1992), Betty Jane Wylie (*Androgyne*, 1995), and others; the Playwright's Union of Canada's 2000 catalogue even has a page listing "Plays with a Shakespearean Theme" (PUC 2000: 106). The recent work of Fischlin and Fortier and the forthcoming Canadian Theatre Review issue on Canadian Adaptations of Shakespeare indicate that this interest extends to other spheres of cultural production. An inquiry into the potential for a specifically Canadian approach to appropriation, perhaps guided by a post-colonial perspective and theories of hybridity, would shed led some much-needed light on O'Brien's claim.

Throughout this argument I have been guided by an appreciation of Shakespeare and of the Canadian playwrights who challenge our ideas about him in their work. My aim throughout has been to privilege the work of O'Brien and Sears and to follow their lead in questioning the social construction of Shakespeare as the all-knowing author of plays that, in the words of one *Pericles* survey respondent, "show us who we are and why," regardless of cultural, historical, sexual, or racial difference. In my attempt to illustrate how playwrights use Shakespeare's texts to challenge his cultural influence, I hope I have not aggravated the problem by reducing the work of Canadian playwrights to the status of currency in the Shakespeare Trade. Similarly, it has not been my intention to re-construct Shakespeare as racist or sexist, or as complicit in a racist, sexist, imperial regime. It is in poor taste, after all, to speak ill of the dead, and like O'Brien and Sears, I come not to savage Shakespeare, but to salvage him.

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